

ANNE
OF THE
MARSH LAND
BY THE LADY BYNG OF VIMY





acv
Alice M. Rice

SUNDAY SCHOOL,
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ANNE OF THE MARSHLAND

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BY
THE LADY BYNG OF VIMY
Author of "Barriers"

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CHAPTER I

TWO ON THE MARSH

IT was not a country calculated to please lovers of a common-place prettiness, and unappreciative strangers were apt to call it plain. The accusation, though unjust, was by no means regrettable, since it saved the neighbourhood from barbarous hordes of tourists capable of desecrating its solitudes with greasy sandwich papers, or strewing its gorse-gilded commons with the wreckage of ginger beer bottles. Perhaps it was for this reason that the astute dwellers in the land fostered its ill-favoured reputation for beauty, jealous as they were of their privacy and knowing that to the eyes which saw, to the ears which heard, and to the soul attuned to its comprehension, their country spread forth its beauties with lavish generosity, while the spirit of romance that permeated its flat surface had stamped itself on their own hearts and minds with an impress that no waters of Lethe could ever obliterate.

In these early autumn days it was a land of storm and stress, desolate save for swiftly flitting stints and redshanks, black-backed gulls, or wild geese who sought

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refuge and food among the barley and clover fields that fringed the shore beyond the marsh. Eerie desolation was the predominating note of the land, for the unshaven spirits of drowned men seemed to cry aloud on the North Sea wind; the ruined priories were haunted by victims of the Black Death which had devastated the neighbourhood centuries ago; and grim tales without end were rife concerning unhallowed things seen by the country folk who had ventured out after nightfall in certain districts.

The landscape lent itself to such fables. It lay mile after mile in monotonous undulations—suggestive of a heavy ground swell, until towards the coast it up-reared itself in a series of hunchbacked hillocks at whose base lay a wide valley, through which a trout stream trickled to the sea. Formerly the stream had been a tidal river, navigable so far inland as Willingsford, at that time a flourishing port where strange ships disgorged their cargoes, and pirates were cast into prison or summarily executed. Now narrow streets, blind alleys and dilapidated cottages occupied the site of forgotten wharfs; the great abbey of Our Lady was a crumbling ruin, and the stream had degenerated to a trickle running between the hedgerow and the main road, save where it crossed the latter in a shallow ford. The land was bare of human habitation, the villages with their windmills and great grey churches scattered; while lonely farmsteads hugged the broken walls of ruined priories as though frightened at their isolation amid an ocean of arable land, where the gold of a stray mustard crop varied its autumn sobriety, or the scarlet of poppies painted its summer fields.

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It was on the eastern slope of a long-backed ridge which rose sharply from the valley, that Stiffborough village, a handful of red-roofed fishermen's cottages, clung to the hillside like swallows' nests beneath the eaves of a house. It boasted a 13th century square-towered church, that dominated it from amid an under-growth of tombstones which leant shoulder to shoulder like drunken men whispering incoherent tales in one another's ears and at the northern end of the little main street stood a dismantled windmill. Shops there were none, save the post office, a small general store, and the bakery where for a few pence, the women did their weekly baking, so that Sunday mornings were redolent with the scent of fresh pie crust as their owners carried home the midday dinner.

Eastwards the fields merged with startling abruptness in a salt marsh, carpeted with bog samphire and intersected by creeks and lagoon-like pools of sea water, while a meagre hedge, its roots sunk in a sand drift, its lower branches festooned with dried seaweed, and the bleached corpses of tiny land crabs, divided marsh and arable land. Spring tides battered the base of the hedge, and sometimes in rough weather the incoming seas, mocking its feeble resistance, swept over it and inundated the fields it sought to screen.

A spring tide was rising this evening and, the waters, advancing swiftly to the call of the full October moon, filled the creeks to the accompaniment of a ceaseless bubbling and hissing. Seabirds, disturbed from their customary refuge on the sand banks, wheeled overhead with plaintive cries; the wind moaned disconsolately along the foreshore and from under grey clouds,

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slashed by a streak of saffron, almost malignant in its vividness, the sun sank from sight in a veil of dun coloured mist as two figures appeared, running hastily across the marsh.

A woman led, springing from clump to clump of samphire as the undermining tide knocked and groaned like prisoned demons beneath the surface. She paused now and again to cast an anxious glance at the swiftly filling creeks, spanned by single plank bridges, often devoid even of a handrail to lend security to unsteady footsteps. Behind her came a man, tall, thick-set, outlined in square bulkiness against the sombre background of sky and sea. His eyes never left the figure before him and he faced her fully when, having reached the mainland, she turned to him, and said:

“We’ve only just done it!”

She caught her breath in little gasps as the waters swept for the first time over the plank bridge they had crossed. “Another five minutes and we should have had an odious time struggling along; another ten and it would have been no joke for there’s a spring tide to-night and its force is terrific when it comes down the creeks and swirls over the handrails of the bridges.” She paused, her breast still heaving with their race against the sea. Then she resumed rather quickly. “I remember seeing that big black retriever of Henry Anderson’s trying to swim against such a tide; the poor beast couldn’t make any headway, nor hold its own even, and it must have been swept away if we hadn’t called it down stream till it could gradually get ashore.”

She looked at the man, her face flushed, her grey-green eyes still kindled with the past excitement. The

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wind that had ruffled the hair curling crisply round her ears had set it flying in all directions, and she unpinned her hat to repair the disorder. But it was a difficult task, for her curls eluded her as though from wilful mischief, and she was forced to seek refuge in a bay formed by the ragged fence that separated her from the fields.

Miriam Heathcote's sole claim to beauty lay in the golden tints of her hair; in her well built figure whose girlish lines, although she was thirty-five, gave her an appearance of youth, and in the clear eyes that met those of her fellows with fearless honesty. To the man at her side she represented all that he demanded of charm and beauty in womanhood, and as he looked at her he marvelled at the ease with which a woman, casting behind her the memory of serious things, will babble of trifles. Personally he was stirred and shaken by the emotional scene they had enacted on the shore and which the incoming sea had brought to an abrupt conclusion. She could laugh! Talk of a black retriever fighting the current! Then he was in love; and perhaps—very probably she was not, which made all the difference.

"I was an idiot not to notice the tide," she continued, aware of his dumbness, and intent on keeping the conversational ball rolling in a safe direction. "Old hand as I am on the marshes I should have known better than be nearly caught, especially to-night, when there was danger as well as unpleasantness in it."

She turned to him with a smile that died abruptly as she found his eyes fixed on hers with a questioning hunger that revealed the uselessness of glossing matters, or of evading a reply to the question of their marriage

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which he had propounded. Five years ago she had refused him, and it was intolerable to find herself confronted again by the same necessity, and she hated herself, resenting the necessity that forced her to face these moments, since she lacked the primary instincts of a flirt and was devoid of that feminine vanity which demands a sacrificial victim as proof of its power.

"You didn't get wet, did you?" he asked anxiously. She shook her head, and held out a foot shod in a stout boot.

"Not in the least. I wear clumpers here; they are the only things for the marsh."

As she struggled with her hair and stood, straight and slender, both arms raised to her head, the fading light was kind to her and she seemed the incarnation of youth and health which she represented to Jack Frazer. Since he was still speechless she broke hastily into words: "What a change this is for you after India, isn't it? Our east coast breezes will do you a world of good I'm sure."

She knew she was talking nonsense, but anything was better than this strained silence which might evoke a resumption of the question to which she had hitherto vouchsafed no definite answer. And yet, surely by her very evasion of words he must have realised the old refusal awaited him. She glanced at him surreptitiously, and as she wrestled with her curls, the wind catching a strand of hair, blew it towards him and he flinched when the golden tendril almost swept his face. It seemed to sharpen the painful incertitude of the moment. He had loved her for long, he had trusted firmly to the belief that a woman's "No," was seldom

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final, and throughout the past five years in India he had fed on a hope that this second attempt would be crowned by success. He had made his attempt and now with dogged persistence he waited for her reply.

Nobody knew how passionately he longed to take her to the long, low bungalow, in whose garden purple bougaenvillæa and azure morning glory trailed over oleander and rose bushes blushing with fragrant blossoms. Nobody suspected him of building airy castles, of dwelling in a phantom paradise of his own creation. To the world he was a hard-headed Indian civilian with a talent for managing the natives under his care. To his friends he was a stolid, unimaginative man, "a confirmed old bachelor." Yet he had dreamt and hungered cruelly during the last few years, and now as he waited in the midst of a scene so far removed from that in which he had dreamt and hoped, his spirits sank; for the murmur of the tide, the wail of the rising wind sang of futile hopes, shattered dreams. But still she had not spoken and he refused to acknowledge defeat till she did so.

And the woman divining all that passed in his mind, shrank still more from speech. Why could she not find courage to accept the devotion he offered, to forget that fruitless love of her girlhood which had haunted and marred her life? She knew this old friend, appreciated his strength of mind and body, his unselfishness, his power of handling and leading men, a gift which appealed to her as the primary attribute of a man. Yet he could not lead her, mere woman that she was, and she who had often led her fellows suddenly felt the responsibility weigh on her; and longed in her turn to

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be led by another. She hesitated, tempted to accept the love of this man with whom she could live in fullest trust, in whom she would never fail to find the support she craved. He disturbed her meditations by speaking almost harshly.

"You've given me no answer." She looked at him, and his eyes held hers relentlessly. "I've waited five years; I tried to find content in my work, to put away all thought of you. It was impossible, so I came home to ask again if you would marry me. I daresay it seems a weak thing to do; I daresay you may despise me for it, but the temptation was too strong—give me your answer."

His tone was peremptory; he had commanded subordinates so long, that he had lost the art of pleading. But his manner pleased her, for she was a creature of fine courage, and his roughness served to increase her longing for the master mind she needed, and Jack Frazer was indeed near attaining his heart's desire in the moment that she turned her head from him while her eyes followed the flight of the sea-birds. But the song of the wind, the purring of the tide—things with which the romance of her youth were inextricably bound up—sounded in her ears and the old ties asserted themselves, sweeping aside her hesitation. With her face still turned from him she said slowly, but firmly:

"I'm sorry, Jack, for I'm so fond of you that I wish things could be different. But my fondness for you is that of a friend, nothing further. It's the same old feeling I have always had for you ever since I can remember; I look on you as my best friend, as you have always been, as I hoped you would always be—but I don't love you."

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"Perhaps in time," he hazarded, "if we were married, you might get to care for me; friendship so often grows into love; it did with me, quite suddenly, you know, so, why not with you?"

She shook her head, and turned towards him, her eyes sorrowful, her voice low. "Everybody is different in those ways, dear Jack; and I don't believe a woman falls in love with a man just because he is her husband; on the contrary, I think the tie, without the softening of love, would be—intolerable. I'm convinced if we tried the experiment it could only end in disaster for both of us, and I'm too fond of you to risk such a thing as that."

She paused; her reasons sounded paradoxical, and paradox was a thing she detested, but she failed at the moment to see any other manner of explanation, till a sudden resolve sent the colour flaming to her face, and she said shyly. "You see, Jack, I know the difference between the love I have for you and the—the other sort of love, the sort you want me to have for you, and I know that with me the one can never grow into the other, much as I wish it could." She hesitated, looked up, and held out both hands with a quick gesture of appeal. "Oh, my dear, if you only knew how desperately I wish it was possible to say 'yes.' "

Her words and action struck him even more cruelly than her refusal, for they betrayed how much she too had suffered, and the link of this common suffering drew them together, as he gripped her hands in his. Then his soul revolted from the thought that another man filled her life. He had fancied her heart-whole, free from such things, and as the truth dawned on him and his

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dreams faded, he stood before her speechless.

"I'm sorry," he said after a pause. The simple words covered a vast regret both for her and for himself. "I'm sorry; and I'm grateful to you for telling me what you have done. It makes it easier—in a way. If one knows definitely there's no chance of getting a thing, one can forget one ever dreamt dreams about it, ever built castles in the air for it to live in." He paused and dropped her hands. "I'll only ask you Mim, to write and tell me when you're going to marry him; it would be hateful to see it in the papers first."

She forced a little choked laugh as she answered, "There will never be a question of marriage. It's an old story, dead and buried long ago, only the wound won't heal, and I couldn't accept such a love as yours knowing that I should give you nothing but friendship in return; knowing that the memory of somebody else stood always between us."

"Poor old Mim, I wish I could help you. If I could do anything you would tell me, wouldn't you? You wouldn't let this thing of mine stand in the way? Or, again, if the old wound should by chance heal—well, one never knows," he added haltingly, afraid of hurting her, yet finding it impossible to abandon hope entirely, even at this eleventh hour.

"One never knows with a woman, was on your tongue only you were too kind," she interposed, with a smile. Even Jack failed to realise a woman's capacity for life-long devotion! The thought stung her.

He was unconscious of her wounded feelings as he answered quickly, "But you are so different from other women; one doesn't judge you by ordinary standards."

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"That is every right-minded man's conception of the woman he loves, and you don't know how much it helps a woman to become better than she is, if she feels that she stands on a pinnacle in somebody's sight."

She spoke with attempted lightness, but tears shone in her eyes as she turned aside and pushing open the gate, passed into the field. Frazer followed her, fastened the latch, then stood for a moment and looked back across the marsh to a promontory of land where cottage lights winked through the dying day and the wings of a broken windmill stood stark against the sky as though upbraiding heaven for its maimed condition. He knew the scene would live in his memory during the suffocating Indian nights in which he must listen to the hum of the mosquitoes or the haunting cry of the jackal, and he would hear above these things, the murmur of the sea, the wail of the rising wind, weighted with the sea birds' plaintive notes, and he would visualise with terrible clearness Miriam's figure as she leant over the gate and gazed seawards, a troubled look on her habitually calm face. An impatient movement on her part recalled his straying thoughts, and turning, he followed her across the fields.

"Thanks for telling me what you have done, Mim, it was good of you to take me into your confidence," he said abruptly, and neither spoke again till they emerged on the chalky high road, which lost itself among the cottages of Stiffborough village.

Facing the gateway through which they had left the fields, ran a low stone wall, grey and lichen stained, beyond which the shelving ground led to the trout stream. Clinging to the steep bank, embedded in a

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grove of horse chestnuts and beech trees lay the straggling mass of Stiffborough Hall, a large rubble-built house, with gardens enclosed by quaintly cut yew hedges that shewed darkly massive in the twilight. Heavily rounded towers flanked the main front of the building, and the gables, tipped with delicate brick finials, the graceful and varied chimney stacks, spoke of the prosperous and artistic Elizabethan days in which Christopher Inescourt had built his home.

Miriam paused almost involuntarily before the wall, and her eyes rested on the house, as Jack asked how the Inescourts fared. "They were newly married last time I was home and desperately in love. Is it still a success?"

For a second the woman by his side hesitated, then she said with a certain hardening of her voice:

"I believe so."

"Are they still frantically in love?"

"It was too violent to last—at least on her part—and they have settled down to the sober routine of matrimony, I think."

"You only think?"

"One can only surmise, not know one's neighbours' inner lives, can one?"

"You and Phil were such great friends, I thought you would be sure to know definitely."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. There was more of irony than mirth in the sound, but Jack, occupied with the Inescourts' relations, failed to detect it.

"Wives are effectual extinguishers on the candle of old friendships," she said, her mind filled with the

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suffering that such extinguishing had brought to her and to many of her sex who have stood in close and sweet friendship with a man until the extinguisher's advent! Resentment burnt suddenly within her soul. Why should it always be the woman who paid the price of the man's happiness and pleasure? Turning to Frazer with a wistful smile she resumed:

"The extinguishing hurts abominably, so can you wonder that we women are apt to paint marriage at its blackest to the men who are dear to us?"

He made no reply and she continued, more to herself than to him, "It requires immense strength of character for the man to keep the flame of an old friendship alight if his wife means to blow it out, and Phil is like most men; he has let the flame burn low now."

"That's a pity."

"Not if he is happy, and presumably he is, as he worships the ground Anne treads on. However, Bacon was right, 'unmarried men make best friends, best masters, best servants.' "

Frazer was silent, plunged in memories of the days when as children, they had all three played in the long passages at Stiffborough. Then he broke the silence:

"Mrs. Chester was a bit acrimonious on the subject of the Inescourt marriage. She was inclined to mystery, though Phil and mystery are incompatible."

"Mystery is a stock-in-trade of hers; it sharpens people's curiosity, but her bark is worse than her bite, poor old soul; still I wish Anne hadn't let her tongue wag at the old lady's expense, for a sharp tongue is a dangerous weapon in this country."

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“Is she clever?”

For a moment she paused—then answered rather hurriedly: “Quick rather than clever; and full of fancies that she pours out in poetry, which I confess I don’t appreciate. She paints nicely and is a bit of an artist all round, though by no means so big a bit as she tries to make one believe.”

“Artistic tendencies and Phil would hardly make a satisfactory amalgam.” Frazer picked at the orange lichens clinging to the stones of the wall and Miriam shrugged her shoulders.

“They are a strangely assorted couple, and I often wonder what topics they have in common when they are alone at Stiffborough.”

Lamplight gleamed through a latticed window as she leant her arms on the top of the wall, and the suggestion of homely comfort drew a little sigh from her. How much did Anne appreciate the old house she wondered? Then Jack roused her by suggesting that in all probability the Inescourts remained silent when alone, Philip not being loquacious by nature, nor likely to have changed in that respect since his marriage.

“No, he hasn’t changed in any essentials, thank goodness; he is, as he always was, one of the best men on earth.”

That same tenderness stole round her mouth again.

“It’s a dear old place,” Frazer remarked as he flicked aside the loosened pieces of lichen; “a thousand pities they have sold so much land, and let the village creep nearly to the door—but needs must when the devil of means drives. I suppose the age and history of the house appeal to Lady Inescourt’s poetical tendencies, don’t they?”

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"She hates the place and everything about it." Miriam jerked out the remark and he was surprised, for she seldom delivered herself of tart speeches. "Anne," she continued, "is a Londoner born and bred; her home ought to have been there and her husband should have possessed a huge income to satisfy her tastes."

"I don't like your description of Phil's wife," he said, meditatively, and she flinched, ashamed of her animosity.

"I'm sorry if I haven't been fair, for she has many good points, and it's only silly affectations and superficialities of that sort which annoy me," she paused, then added, "I sometimes think she doesn't appreciate Phil sufficiently. All her admiration goes to a set of people who dabble in art or politics and talk what seems to me paradoxical nonsense."

Frazer looked at her in silence, and it was not until they had left the village behind them that he said abruptly:

"Why didn't you marry him? I thought in old days it would end that way because he was so fond of you."

The darkness hid the wave of crimson that flooded Miriam's face as she answered with a laugh:

"We were far too good friends, and besides we both had other fish to fry."

"Evidently, but I question whether he doesn't find the fryng of his particular fish a bit awkward."

She made no reply for she had a guilty feeling that she had been unjust in prejudicing Frazer against Anne Inescourt.

CHAPTER II

TWO IN THE HALL

THE world had expected the Inescourt's marriage to prove a success, and there seemed promise of its doing so at the outset. They were both young, both in love, and Stiffborough with its spell of marshland and rolling, peaceful country formed an admirable setting for romance. But fulfilment fell short of expectation as others than Miriam soon began to suspect. The few neighbours at the Old Hall grew suspicious not only concerning Anne's friends, whom they disliked, but concerning Anne herself, who was by no means their accepted ideal of a country squire's wife, especially a squire whose only interests lay in sport and agriculture. Anne hated both, but being Philip's antithesis had attracted him even as his robust virility had attracted her. He had formed a pleasant contrast to the emasculated young men about town who frequented the house of an aunt who had brought her up since her parents' death, and she had fallen wildly in love with Philip who was a different type to anything she had previously encountered. The neighbours had been a trifle resentful that Inescourt should have chosen a wife out of his own county; however, being simple, kindly folk they extended the hand of friendship to the bride who at the outset was so eager to play her new part that she found life delightful at Stiffborough, and was loud in praise of the beauties of the undulating country that afforded

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an unrivalled canvas for the fitful play of sunlight and shadow.

This phase was of short duration. Anne was a born Londoner, and once the novelty began to wear off the yoke of marriage pressed on her slender shoulders. She ceased to praise the East Anglian landscape. From admiring the antiquity of her new home she dubbed it a “rat-riddled-hole,” and in place of beguiling words of love whispered in her husband’s ears, came murmurs at his short-comings, at the monotony of her life, at the stupidity of her neighbours. To Anne no good thing could come out of her particular Nazareth.

A year and a half of marriage wrought this revulsion of feeling. She discovered that Philip was slow witted; his efforts to give her the sympathy she demanded failed; he irritated her by maladroitness of speech and roused rather than soothed her temper, until she took refuge in sketching and the composition of those verses which Miriam failed to appreciate. Though none of Anne’s accomplishments reached the highwater mark of art, they filled her time and kept her moderately contented, until having published a small volume of poems, active trouble ensued.

Despite the fact that a critic more truthful than kind had dubbed them “a metrical soufflé with a nauseously erotic flavour” the poems found favour in the eyes of Lady Rosendale, a leading light among that small sect of pseudo-intellectuals whom for obvious reasons their enemies had nick-named “The Affinities.” This coterie sang their praises loudly. They pronounced them subtle, cryptic, symbolic, etc., and to Anne, hater of the obvious, ardent disciple of the obscure, these words were

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immeasurably sweet. From that time the term “my Art” was constantly on her lips; she affected the flowing veil, and bedraggled garments that marked the Affinities; she traded on her frail physique to acquire the haggard appearance and hungry intensity of gaze common to her new friends; while such terms as a “crushing borax” to express boredom, or “rotting at Stiffborough” to describe her home life, became daily phrases. With regard to further artistic productions, however, she was content to repose on the laurels earned by stringing half-digested thoughts on a half-forged chain of words, which if lacking meaning, tickled the ear with a pleasant, rhythmical lilt.

No friends could have been more baleful to a woman of Anne’s temperament than this set with its nauseous friendships and hateful travesties of the finer emotions. Past masters in the art of skimming, and in an affectation of learning, they flicked the surface of art, science, literature, politics, metaphysics, belief or agnosticism with the lash of apt but shallow witticisms and whittled the art of conversation to that paradoxical juggling with words which hides an ignorance of prosaic facts. They had above all reduced log-rolling to a science that ensured them notoriety in its most blatant form, for they were clever fools; clever because it requires considerable ability to scream inefficient people into billets for which they possess no qualifications; fools, because they lacked the humour or wit to perceive the shallowness of their learning, and the absurdity of their affectations. But Anne fancied herself admitted to the councils of the Olympians when she sat among the Affinities, her eyes alight, her cheeks glowing with

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excitement, and their presence at Stiffborough filled her with delight and Philip with alarm, for they shewed scant civility to those outside their small circle, and in their eyes, he was merely "Dear Anne's Incubus."

Martin Sutherland was the only Affinity who treated him civilly, so that, painfully conscious as Inescourt was of his mental shortcomings, and because Sutherland was friendly where the others were contemptuous, and sympathised when the partridges were "patchy," or the root crop afforded insufficient covert for the precious birds, his shyness melted like snow in the sunshine and his alarm resolved itself into a doglike species of affection of Anne's particular friend, who was not above talking to a fool like himself, as he explained to Mrs. Chester when she referred acrimoniously to "the newspaper man." But Mrs. Chester had snorted, for the Affinities were anathema to her and she loved Philip dearly.

Who Sutherland was or whence he came the Affinities had no knowledge. They posed as democrats worshipping an aristocracy of talent rather than birth, and to them his credentials lay in a fine intellect and in certain brilliant writings which had brought him prominently before the public eye. Nature had intended him for a poet, but poverty, an infinitely more potent factor in the ordering of human lives, forced him into journalism. He had followed the decree of necessity because by so doing success was more assured, and an income though small, less precarious. But at first he was a rebellious Israelite in the Egypt of a newspaper office and the brickfields of journalism appealed to him in no way. Time hardened him however; even dulled

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his poetical tendencies, so that he found content in the work that supplied him with those agreeable things which the pursuit of his heart's desire could only have procured for him after long years of labour.

The law of affinity had drawn him to Anne as forcibly as the law of contrast had drawn her to her husband, and the friendship ripened apace. Her beauty pleased him, and her gay if shallow brain amused him. On her side she was attracted by a man who combined the journalist's swiftness in assimilating the superficialities of a subject, with the student's love of detail and the artist's appreciation of beauty. Being as it happened the first woman who realised these varied aspects of his nature, he responded to her sympathy, and laid bare recesses of his mind which he had hitherto hidden under a mask of cynical contempt. There are few things more engaging or more dangerous than the unveiling of hidden characteristics between the sexes, but Anne was ignorant of possible danger. Sutherland, more astute, was alive to it, but held the amusement worth the risk entailed, and became a constant guest at Stiffborough, welcomed by husband and wife, because Philip knew that his presence soothed Anne's ill humours.

On the same evening that Miriam and Frazer, standing outside in the autumn dusk, discussed the Inescourt's marriage, Anne was seated in the hall with Sutherland. They had been talking for a long time and at last he summarised two of their friends.

"Greenfield is an argument without a conclusion; Barrington is a conclusion without an argument," he said.

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Anne, seated beside him in the ingle nook, laughed softly, for she loved his trenchant summaries and shrewd comments.

"It's perfectly true," she said, "I wish I had your power of summing people up in a few words."

"Your gifts in that line are infinitely better than mine. Clever women are quicker both at perception and expression than men."

She darted a glance at him, doubting the sincerity of his compliment.

"Again cases of conclusions without arguments."

She addressed him with a little crooked smile which brought to light a dimple at the left hand corner of her mouth. The smile was engaging, full of mischief. Sutherland knew the smile, and the dimple was an old friend whose appearance he invariably welcomed.

"Why accuse me of saying one thing and meaning another? I never said a woman's conclusions lacked the foundation of reasoned argument."

"I'm not sure you didn't imply it."

"I implied nothing then or at any time—to you. Implying a thing suggests an absence of sympathetic understanding." He lowered his voice and turned more directly towards her. "There is no need to imply anything when perfect communion exists between two souls, is there?"

"That's beside the mark," she retorted, a vague uneasiness possessing her when she found his eyes fixed intently on hers.

"Possibly. My mind has passed on to the question of implying things. It's a more interesting subject."

"Abstract things are always interesting." It was

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rather from the necessity of saying something than because she had bestowed much thought on the matter that she spoke.

Sutherland leant forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands extended to the blaze. "Yes, undoubtedly," he said, then stared into the fire, as a smile played round his thin-lipped mouth, "and yet my mind was not entirely occupied with abstract things. I was thinking of you—of ourselves, of those three phases in one's relations with women—Speech, Suggestion, Intuition. With the majority one rarely passes the first, with a certain number one reaches the second, but it is only with one woman in the whole course of life that one attains, as a rule, to the immense delights of the third." He turned his gaze from the logs on the hearth and allowed it to rest significantly on her. "Surely we have reached the third phase—now?" There was a marked emphasis on the pronoun, and Anne leant back, as though to avoid the fierceness of the fire; by her movement she fell into the shadow of the inglenook. His eyes, bold and direct in their gaze, forced hers to meet them, and she was conscious, for the first time, of a power in him which compelled her gaze, and her breath came rather unsteadily as he continued in a curiously tense voice: "We have passed the preliminaries now."

His hand caught hers, closed swiftly and firmly on it, and she shivered, but made no attempt to move.

"We're very good friends," she answered, stiffly.

"Something more than friends, Anne. Friendship is such a cold word, such a poor half-hearted thing. Friendship is your sentiment for the young savages who help your husband to hunt foxes or slaughter inoffensive

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birds. Friendship is the sentiment one woman feels—or rather pretends to feel—for another. Such a bond as ours should be infinitely closer than a mere tepid friendship. Surely you don't intend it to end there—do you, Anne?"

His voice lingered tenderly over her name as it had lingered a moment ago; the steady pressure of his hand seemed to sap her strength, till impelled by his will, she found herself drawn towards him, her lips parted, her eyes dilated. She was conscious of faintness, a dryness in mouth and throat, an inability to withdraw her gaze from his as his hold on her tightened, and taking her other hand in his, he pulled her fiercely towards him and kissed her lips. "Anne," he whispered thickly, "don't you understand? Anne—I love you."

His words broke the spell. With an angry cry she wrenched herself free and crouched against the furthest end of the settle. He made no effort to retain her hands nor did he speak, but watched her narrowly and for an instant his cynical smile re-appeared; then he said gently, "I frightened you. Forgive me—"

She made no reply, but sat with her hands pressed down tightly on either side of her, grasping the edge of the oak seat.

She felt that she must clutch some tangible thing as the silence was broken by the grandfather clock chiming the quarter before eight. The familiar sound brought her back to realities, and restored in a measure her self-confidence. She sat upright, her grasp on the settle loosened and she said coldly: "Philip's late; I hope he hasn't had an accident."

Sutherland's lips twisted ironically. "What incom-

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prehensible things you women are. Why fret about Philip? Why pretend, to me at all events, you're so much in love with him that you can't bear him out of your sight?"

"He's my husband," she answered, staring into the fire with sullen eyes.

Martin laughed; her manner was rather an attempt at defence from a danger to which she had nearly succumbed than a sign of aversion from himself.

"There's no chance of forgetting your bondage; Philip is a very plain presentment of it," he said, and leant back. "You are splendid to trouble, or pretend to trouble, as you do about the absence of a man for whom you no longer have the faintest love, but to whom an idiotic moral law has bound you for life. It's a long term, isn't it?—a life sentence!"

She vouchsafed no reply at first, then she answered, "Philip is very good to me."

"Although he fails to understand you, fails to realise all the perfections of the woman he has had the good fortune to marry?"

A petulant movement escaped her. There were times when he was guilty of fulsome compliments which angered her, as much for his sake as for her own, since she was too intelligent to swallow such boluses and they lowered him in her esteem. A retort rose to her lips, a demand that he should cease from such remarks, but the sound of a horse trotting quickly over the drive silenced her.

"Ah, Philip, she exclaimed, and there was unfeigned relief in her voice as she half rose, her lips parted, the colour returning to her face.

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"Your husband," he replied, with a grim smile; "safe and sound, you see, after all your fears."

She ignored his words. A passionate longing for Inescourt's presence had seized her and her eyes were fixed on the door, her thoughts flew to him and him alone at this moment. It was long since she had looked so eagerly for his return, or realised the power of his protecting care and unfailing love. Now he stood before her imagination as the hero of her girlish dreams, the glorified husband of her honeymoon. Her pulses quickened as the firm, heavy tread echoed over the stone flags of the outer hall, and a little cry broke from her as the door opened and his broad figure, its size accentuated by his white leathers and red coat, stood sharply defined against the oak panelling.

Dazzled for a second by the lamp-light after the darkness of the night, he hesitated in the doorway and peered across the hall, until catching sight of his wife he advanced. The eagerness in her face was unmistakable, haunted as she still was by the past danger, he saw it, but was ignorant of its cause, and smiled at her as he drew nearer. Before his wholesome presence the elemental forces of passion which had dominated the man and well nigh subjugated the woman, melted; things emotional or noxious faded before him and Anne longed to fly to him, to bury her face in his breast like a child frightened by the terrors of darkness.

The next moment her mood changed as she saw him more clearly. He was covered with clay mud, his coat was wet and torn, a trail of dried blood marked where a bramble had torn its way across his face, and his hands blue with cold, awkward in their movements, fumbled

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at the battered hat which hung from a hat guard. His face was red, wet too with the mist that enveloped the land and these things detracted from the aspect of knight errant which she had pictured. She hated dirt or untidiness; and she noted her husband's defects, sniffed the aroma of damp cloth, stables and mud which permeated his clothes. Her susceptibilities were offended, her dreams shattered, and her expression was stormy when he spoke.

"I'm awfully sorry to be late, old girl, and to come in all dirty, but I took a couple of tosses, and when I left hounds there was a beastly 'smother' coming up with the tide, so I couldn't shove along."

His voice was cheerful, for the sight of her, framed in the recess of the ingle nook, her face illumined by the glow of the burning logs, had filled him with simple gladness and content.

"Do keep away, Phil; you're covered with mud," she cried, and swept the folds of her teagown from the neighbourhood of his boots. "I wish you wouldn't come in here till you have made yourself presentable, you know I hate muddy footmarks all over the place."

A more quick-witted man might have retorted that after spending a day in the saddle he could hardly leave dirty footmarks behind him; but Inescourt was not gifted with powers of repartee, so he apologised humbly. Nevertheless he was hurt, for he had pressed a tired horse against his kindly inclination, and he was more shaken than he cared to confess by the "couple of tosses" of which he made light. There was a faint reproach in his voice when he said:

"I'm sorry, but I thought you might have got

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fussed, so I came straight in to let you know I was all right."

Nothing had escaped Sutherland. He was moved to sudden pity for the man's clumsiness, his blindness to his wife's mood, and he tried to smooth matters, because his host's entrance had been propitious to himself, since Anne's anger against him had turned against her husband, so he made much to Inescourt of his wife's recent fears for his safety. At Sutherland's words Philip's eyes, filled with their dog-like faithfulness, sought Anne's again.

"Poor little girl, I'm sorry you were frightened. But really, as Sutherland says, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. However it's a good thing you had him to comfort you."

The woman was silent. What would Philip have said to Martin's manner of comforting an anxious wife, she wondered? For a second the men looked at one another across Anne, standing between them, and a slow smile dawned on Sutherland's face as he rose and leaning indolently against the mantelpiece asked whether Philip had enjoyed himself.

Inescourt's face cleared, the run had been unusually good for the Stiffborough country and he thirsted to recount its features. "Top hole!" he exclaimed; "we found at once and had quite a decent—"

"You had better go and dress unless you mean to keep dinner waiting all night. I've already put it off half-an-hour," Anne's voice cut in icily, and she walked upstairs with an air of aloofness that left no doubt in Philip's mind concerning her feelings, and as he undressed he meditated on his clumsiness in vexing her so

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constantly. He dubbed himself a “fat-headed, dunder-witted fool,” as he paused, one foot wedged in the boot-jack and contemplated his reflection in the glass. Mud splashes and a scratched face are not calculated to improve anybody’s appearance, and he wondered whether he should not abjure hunting since it frightened Anne? He loved sport with the passionate love of a man who has few other occupations, and to renounce the one dearest to him would be a hard task; but if it was right towards her he would part with this most precious pleasure and she should never hear him murmur at its loss. He was so occupied with these questions that he forgot to whistle in his bath, or groom himself afterwards with soothing stable noises as he dried his body in the warm towel.

Anne, meanwhile, alone with her thoughts, began to review past events. Sutherland had frightened her by a display of deeper feelings than she had cared to touch. His kiss had been an insult! And yet it was pleasant to feel her power over him; to see how deeply he was moved by her, and the crooked smile twitched her lips. A second later she revolted from the idea of Martin’s love; she thought of herself as Philip’s wife and the memory of his devotion, his protective tenderness enveloped and soothed her. But Sutherland’s passion was a new element, and novelty was pleasant to her, though she was too slight a creature for great enterprises, and the realisation of his lawless passion had frightened her. Even the knowledge that her beauty had impelled him to a rash action, paled before her fear of the world’s reprobation, for if the Affinities sailed decidedly near the wind, they had scant tolerance for

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open transgression. Not that she had any intention of transgressing. Martin had been wrong, she had been foolish, that was all, she told herself as she moved about the room seeking to dismiss the matter from her mind.

But a few minutes later she found herself contemplating it again. It was irresistible to dally with a flattering memory! She pulled herself up abruptly. The affair must end at once—she was shocked at herself—positively shocked, and for a second she assumed the most correct of attitudes. Then vanity overcame her, and sitting down before the mirror she studied her own reflection.

“Anne, don’t you understand? Anne, I—love---you.”

The tenderness of Sutherland’s voice, lingering over her name returned to her memory, and she shivered as the little smile crossed her face again. How could any woman resist such a tone? No wonder she had let him kiss her, no wonder she had rested in his arms for a moment. After all, what harm had been done? It had only been for a moment. A hot flush suffused her cheeks and she buried her face in her hands, ashamed of the pleasure she derived from the memory of these things. She exulted, yet she was angry with him. The two sentiments warred within her, and taking the hand glass she examined herself from every point of view, anxious to see how she appeared to him.

Behind her the room was dark and threw into relief her pale, oval face, delicate features and red lips with their engaging dimple and little crooked smile. It accentuated her black brows arched in a permanent little air of surprise, and her eyes that danced mischievously

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as they reflected the light from the candles. As she smiled at her reflection the vacillation and peevishness which marred her mouth in repose were banished by the changing expressions that crossed her face like ripples on the surface of a pool. She revelled in her beauty and glanced admiringly at the line of her shoulders where they rose above the drapery of her dress. A touch of gratified vanity set the crown on her emotions, and she was sorry for Martin, though she felt he must learn to exercise more self-control, while on her side she must be less friendly towards him. Forewarned was forearmed. At that point her meditations were broken by Philip's knock at the door and the sound recalled her recent tartness to him. She was sorry; she had not meant anything by it. There were so many occasions when she did not mean half she said or did, and she was in the mood to confess her regret when Philip unconsciously afforded her the opening which she would have lacked the humility to find for herself.

"I'm awfully sorry I vexed you by coming in so dirty," he said as he stood in the doorway.

"It was my fault, Phil, I was to blame. Something had annoyed me and I vented my bad temper on you. I'm sorry."

She paused and slipped some rings on her fingers. His face cleared as he watched her, an immense tenderness stole over it. She seldom apologised and it touched him inexpressibly, feeling as he did that perhaps he was at fault.

"Poor little girl, it was only because you had been fretting at my being late, I'm most awfully sorry, and if you like, I'll chuck hunting."

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Words choked in her throat, for she had not bestowed a thought on him till Sutherland's hand closing upon hers had frightened her into desiring his presence.

"Perhaps that had something to do with it," she said mendaciously, replying to the first part of his sentence. "Still I had no business to speak as I did."

He advanced, encouraged by this new gentleness. After all it was anxiety for him which had caused her to speak tartly, and the thought restored his self-confidence.

"Poor little darling, I'm a selfish brute," he said, putting both arms round her.

"You're not that, Phil," she said softly. "You spoil me." She looked up and as his eyes met hers, the flush of shame spread over her face and neck, her gaze fell before his, her arms stole round his neck.

"I couldn't spoil you too much, darling," he answered.

She threw her head back with a choked sob, and he stooped to kiss her throat where the steady throbbing of the pulses under the skin caught his eye. She hid her face against his coat with a quick impulse of shame.

"Don't Phil, I've not been a good wife to you. I haven't given you any children—and that was the great wish of your life. I don't take any interest in your amusements—I don't hunt or shoot or do any of the things you care for." She spoke quickly, enumerating her sins of omission. Silence was intolerable and her soul demanded confession of some kind as atonement.

"Thank goodness you don't; I loathe a sporting woman. Women oughtn't to want to kill things or do the rough things men do." He paused and laughed. "Fancy your coming home with a beastly bramble

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scratch across your dear little face! It would be horrible."

"There's a difference between that and hating sport as I do."

"You don't really hate it. You used to like coming out with the guns and all that sort of thing, you know, only you're so awfully busy now."

Anne's literary achievements filled his limited comprehension with awe. It was only since the advent of Sutherland and her inclusion in the inmost circle of the Affinities that she had developed this hatred of sport, and she suddenly wondered whether the hatred was real or assumed. In old days she had found zest in the sight of a well-killed bird; excitement in listening for the whir of a rising covey, in watching the brown atoms sailing over the heads of the guns. She was puzzled at herself and her moods.

"No, I'm jolly glad you're not different from what you are, darling," Philip resumed after a moment's pause, during which he recalled the days of their courtship and early married life when she had walked with him through the turnip fields, or accompanied him to the meet in her pony cart. "I wouldn't see you altered for anything. I only want one thing from you."

Alarm filled her; had he realised her danger she questioned? Was he going to make her renounce her friendship with Sutherland?

But his thoughts were far from such matters, they centred solely on the woman who, despite her failings, gilded life for him. "I only want your love; that satisfies me entirely," he said.

It was a simple fact spoken with all the simplicity

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and straightforwardness of his soul. "I've got that, darling, haven't I?"

"Yes, yes, of course you have."

Her words came hastily, falling over one another almost, for she seemed to hear Martin's voice saying, "Anne, I love you." It was horrible that this thing should haunt her while she stood with her husband's arms round her, and she clung to him tightly.

"Call me by my name," she cried. "Call me Anne—tell me that you love me—quickly—quickly!"

He looked at her in surprise as she gave his shoulders a shake, her eyes devouring his face with fierce intensity.

"Call me Anne!" she repeated and stamped her foot.

"Anne," he said, obediently, in a tone of bewilderment. "Yes, dear, certainly—Anne; and you know I love you."

She shivered and drew back from him. There was none of the soft sibilance which had rendered Sutherland's speech beguiling to her ear. She had hoped to break its spell by hearing Philip pronounce her name, declare his love; but doing it to order, startled, too, by her voice and manner, his tone held more of surprise than spontaneity and she was angry.

"What's the matter, darling; you're so white, are you frightened about anything?" As he looked at her ashen face, her eyes with their look of fear, his tone grew full of pity. "Poor little girl, you're still upset, because I was late coming in, it shan't happen again." He pressed her to him, but she pushed him back with a sudden vehemence.

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"You're spoiling my roses," she said as the bruised petals from the bunch of flowers in the bosom of her dress fell to the ground.

"What do a few roses matter if I've got you in my arms?" He spoke almost roughly. She made no reply, but pressed herself against him with a choked sob.

"Why do you love me so much, Phil?" she asked in a muffled tone.

"Because I can't help it. Because it's the strongest and biggest thing in me."

"It's a very great and good thing, and I don't deserve it," she answered unsteadily. "Will you always love me like that?"

"Always."

"No matter what I did? Even if I did anything wicked? Anything disgraceful?"

"Yes." His voice was harsh; then he added more evenly, "Even if you stopped loving me and loved somebody else instead, it wouldn't make any real difference to my love for you. I should go on just the same—I should never change."

"But supposing I was a by-word to the world, would you stick to me then?"

"Of course, didn't I say for better, for worse?" He paused and bit his lip. "You see, even if you got tired of me—even if you left me, I should always hope you would end by coming back; I should just wait for you."

It seemed to him as though the utterance of such possibilities was in a manner degrading to the purity and sweetness he attributed to her, and he held her to him while she hid her face and clung with both hands to the lapels of his coat.

"You'd better come back too, darling, because I

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don't think you'd ever find a man who loved you so much as I do," he said softly. "There isn't any measure for my love, I wish there was, because then, perhaps, I could show you how much you are to me, I could explain what my love for you is like, but though I'm a fool at words, and can't explain things properly, I know it's impossible for anybody to love you more than I do."

She could neither speak nor move. If she cried as she was on the verge of doing, she was fearful of confessing things she might eventually regret. True to the guileful craft of her sex in such situations, she kept silence.

"Would you really forgive me like that if it came to the point?" she asked softly after a pause. "I—I didn't think any man would."

"He would if he was a decent sort of a chap and if he really loved his wife." He looked at the dark head resting against his shoulder and his lips grew set and straight. The conversation was intolerable to him; yet if it pleased her to hear the full tale of his devotion, heaven forbid he should deny her that pleasure. "Of course I should forgive you. I should be so awfully sorry for you, I should do all I could to make you forget, to make you happy again."

Anne choked as she stood with her face buried in his breast. Then he resumed with a forced cheerfulness, "for you see, you jolly well like being loved and made a fuss with, don't you, old girl?"

She made no reply for a moment, then lifting her face abruptly she looked at him and he almost shrank from the intensity of her expression.

"Yes, that's true, I want to be loved—I must be loved—desperately—wholly—entirely," she cried, and her hands gripped his shoulders fiercely.

CHAPTER III

THE PRICKING OF CONSCIENCE

MOST of the night Anne tossed restlessly in her bed. The storm that raged round the house and swept across the distant marsh had not added to her comfort; yet when morning broke and the disturbance sank to rest, the silence seemed oppressive by contrast, as she listened to the ticking of the clock near her bed, the cheerful notes of the blackbirds and thrushes in the garden below. For hours she had courted sleep till she was weary of repeating things learnt by heart as a child; of counting imaginary sheep negotiating an imaginary gap in an imaginary fence, and finally she lay tired but wakeful and stared at the glass panel of the wardrobe. Her mind was horribly active and the mirror became a shadowed pool in whose bosom last night's events reflected themselves, and with a groan of despair, she hid her face in the pillow, while she heard Philip snoring steadily next door.

It was the first time she had been actively and consciously disloyal in thought to her husband and if she had salved her conscience with excuses last night, she had found time since then to envisage matters with the stern aspect born of midnight musings.

Last night's sense of gratified vanity, which had softened the crudeness of events to her, had lost its savour, for it required greater moral strength than hers either to face the bald fact of Sutherland's passion or

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to subdue its memory. He had mistaken her thirst for admiration, her unbalanced love of things dramatic, for a desire to cross the threshold of conventionality, and she resented his mistake. His kiss had left a sense of defilement that was horrible to her, for though she had seen the ways of the Affinities, she had wilfully blinded herself to them, partly because she would acknowledge no faults in her friends, partly because hitherto she had felt no inclination to emulate them in this respect.

Again and again she asked herself what right she had ever given him to act as he had acted, speak to her as he had done with insulting familiarity? What had she ever said or done that he should consider her a light woman? Anne was not among the few women who realise and accept, from the outset, the fact that the basic principle of platonic affection consists of a sentiment which holds but the most distant relation to friendship. Now she was learning her lesson painfully and shrinking from it. Presently she began to arraign herself before the bar of her conscience. The arraignment possessed certain ludicrous elements, for she represented both advocate and prosecutor. The charges ran thus——

Disloyalty to Philip in thought if not in deed, said the prosecutor. A kiss! What was that? A venial matter that need surely not be too severely handled, replied the advocate.

She had (“unconsciously”—interposed the defence) fanned a flame in Sutherland’s breast which only the waters of affliction could quench. That was wrong towards the man.

But, pleaded the advocate, he had lit it for himself; she had given him neither the oil, the wick, nor the

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match. On this point her offence smelt the less rank to heaven.

She had exposed herself to temptation, because it was not the first time he had, covertly, at all events, made love to her. Again the defence pleaded not guilty, since how could one person be held responsible for another's words? How could one person suspect evil of another who came in the guise of friendship?

Advocate and prosecutor then combined to attack Sutherland until he was proven guilty of sin, whilst she stood forth as the victim of his wiles, and she was comforted. But her comfort was of short duration for her sense of shame was stronger for once than her vanity, and as the light strengthened, and the bird chorus broke more loudly on the stillness of the quickening day, her woes increased until, rest being impossible with so uneasy a bedfellow as a smarting conscience, she rose and pulling aside the curtains opened the window, as the first level rays of the Autumn sun fell into the room.

The track of the short-lived storm was marked by a few cumulus clouds, clear-cut against the blue of the sky. In the garden every blade of grass, twig and leaf stood sharply defined while the flowers in the borders lay prone in splashes of yellow, purple and white loveliness. Over the quaintly fashioned figures of the yew hedge, threads of gossamer, alight with diamond prismsed raindrops, wove a filmy veil, and a golden leaved horse chestnut dropped its burden of prickly fruit with a patterning sound on the turf below, while a robin's note rose in the air, and the distant murmur of the sea, ceaseless and soft, formed a faint accompaniment to the wakening day.

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The plaint of the sea called Anne. The sweetness of the air, undefiled by human contact, offered refreshment to her outraged feelings, and slipping on her clothes she ran seaward, across the wet fields, till the blue line of the ocean bounded the horizon, and the crimson tints of the marsh lay at her feet. Over the plank bridges she passed to the stretch of sand, golden in the sunshine, and there she paused, her hands clasped, her breath coming in short little gasps from exertion as she stared across the expanse of water for which she had longed. Its chrysoprase hue and purple shadows still spoke of departed summer, and on the horizon the grey trail of a hidden steamer's smoke broke the uniformity of sky and sea. Nearer home the boats of the Blakesham fishing fleet headed for the harbour, their white sails like a flock of sea birds poised above the bosom of the water. Behind her lay the marsh, its winding creeks and miniature lagoons of water refreshed by the night's spring tide, while overhead the gulls swooped, too eager for their morning meal to notice the slender figure standing by the water's edge.

But marsh and mainland, fishing boats and gulls, had no spell for Anne to-day. She needed the breeze from the ocean, the soothing sense of comfort imparted by space, unbroken by disturbing features and the sea ruffled by its recent buffeting, lapped in troubled waves at her feet and complained to who would lend an ear, of its ill-treatment at the hands of the storm. It was in the plaintive, querulous mood of a whipped child, and the woman's mood responded to it. She too was whipped by the lash of conscience and willing to plain to any discreet but dumb listener, so that a sense of kin-

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ship with nature possessed her as it had never possessed her before. Nature to her as to the majority of her kind, had hitherto been an æsthetic pleasure by reason of its colour, its variety, its sweetness. Its true inwardness and power had not reached her, she was too self-centred to see beyond the surface, too incapable of the detachment which such comprehension demands. But to-day her perceptions were quickened and the sea worked on her soothingly.

Slowly, as she stood in the sweet freshness of the day, her courage returned, or rather that temporary bravado of the driven coward which stands in lieu of courage to such women as Anne, and enables them to present a fictitiously gallant front to the enemy. It fired her now with a desire to meet Martin face to face; to show him her indifference, her contempt. The sense of drama was unduly developed and all her life she had staged events; acting as heroine and audience in dramas of her own devising. At present she longed to strike an heroic attitude in her own eyes and his, to appear as the chaste wife repulsing the tempter; the saint spurning the sinner, and her spirits rose, so that breakfast time found her in an exultant mood, her pale cheeks flushed, her eyes shining so brilliantly that Philip commented on her air of vigour, and said the storm had evidently not disturbed her rest.

“I slept like a top,” she answered gaily.

“Signs of a good digestion and a clear conscience,” Martin interposed.

“Yes, I’m fortunate enough to possess both.”

She shot him a swift glance with the words.

“Perhaps I have a less good digestion, or a more

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tender conscience, and that is why I lay awake," he replied, and Philip remarked that the gale must have been more boisterous on Sutherland's side of the house, than on theirs.

"A man's conscience is not particularly tender as a rule," Anne said curtly.

"Or he has the courage to subdue it?" Martin's look was a direct challenge to argument.

"I don't pretend to give any opinion on men's consciences, I only judge by the outward and visible signs."

"Of the inward and spiritual grace?" Sutherland's eyebrows raised themselves with a hitch of amusement as he spoke.

"Mighty little grace about our sex, Sutherland, eh?" Philip's cheerful voice broke in. He seldom joined in the conversation between his wife and her friends, but a familiar ring about the words had encouraged him. "By the way is that Shakespeare or the Bible, I seem to know the outward and visible and inward and spiritual grace business (somehow?)" he added.

Martin suggested the Catechism.

"Of course I might have known that, but my brain's no better than a sieve," Philip said ruefully.

Anne, who was feeding the spaniel, Jess, offered no remark, she was wondering what Martin would say next, because she longed for the chance to snub him. He seemed unusually silent however and her opportunities had been scarce of playing the outraged and indignant wife. This time, however, he gave her an opening by saying:

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"I saw you coming back from the marsh before breakfast; you might have told me that you meant to go for an early walk, as I should have enjoyed coming with you, it was such a gorgeous morning."

She shot him a swift glance over the edge of her teacup.

"I wanted peace, it was a mood in which 'solitude best contents me.' "

"Indeed; that's a rare thing for a woman."

"Your knowledge of women is small if you fancy we are all cut out on the same pattern."

He shrugged his shoulders with a laugh.

"I don't lay claim to any great knowledge of things feminine; but most women are as like one another, in primary essentials, as the sand puddings children turn out of their pails on the seashore. Some are harder, some softer; some larger, some smaller than others, it's only a question of the size of the pail; the component parts are the same throughout."

Anne flushed. She hated being compared to a mud pie, for which a "sand pudding" was but a euphemism, and she vouchsafed no reply as she filled the slop basin with a weak tea for Jess's benefit. Martin receiving no reply, turned his attention to Philip, and whilst the men talked, Anne surreptitiously studied her guest.

Why did he attract her? He was not handsome; indeed, her husband with his massive comeliness, far outshone the short, insignificant man whose narrowness of face was accentuated by the angularity of the maxillary bones and the breadth of his forehead, disfigured by a couple of clean cut scars, relics of a fall in his boyhood. Straight eyebrows surmounted narrow hazel eyes,

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which had an untrustworthy trick of evasion ; his mouth, thin lipped, and lacking in natural curves, betrayed a capacity for cruelty and a determination it was ill to thwart; his nose was his only good feature, and one didn't fall in love with a well-shaped nose! She was angry, hating to seem ridiculous even in her own sight. She was angry too with Martin for not combining the physique of a Hercules with the brains of a Socrates, as continuing her scrutiny, she noticed his defects seeking vainly an explanation of his charm. Did it lie in his swiftly changing expression? In the quickness of his eyes that gleamed furtively under their apparently half-closed lids? Was it the mobility of his mouth that could smile beguilingly and impart a boyish eagerness to his expression? Was it his voice? The soft sibilance that made of every word a caress? The incisive keenness that at other times converted every word into a double-edged sword of satire? Strung up as she was to a high pitch of emotion, she resented his lack of physical perfections, for Anne was a Grecian in such matters. His tranquillity also angered her, her own mood being by no means equable, and she wondered whether he realised the extent of her indignation? If so, he took matters more philosophically than she liked and her wrath against him increased.

It was not until the meal was over and the brougham stood at the front door that her courage showed any signs of waning. Her husband's presence had acted both as an incentive and a safeguard, but now that he was attending to the disposal of the luggage on the carriage —for he declared that unless supervised the servants were apt to damage the paint—she found herself for

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the first time alone with Martin. Instantly his face changed, softened, and he leant towards her, speaking in a low voice:

“When shall we meet again?”

“I haven’t the least idea.” She met his eyes with defiance that in no way daunted him.

“I suppose you will be coming up for the usual Christmas shopping later on?” he said, ignoring her manner.

“I don’t know.”

She felt herself weakening under this undesired tête-à-tête and turned impatiently towards the door, but he intercepted her by so natural a movement that it seemed to lack all premeditation.

“When you do know, perhaps you will write to me and we will fix up a theatre or a dinner somewhere—as usual.”

He laid a slight stress on the final words and she flinched, for they brought home to her the fact that she intended to sever old ties. Philip however saved her from the necessity of reply by calling from the hall that Martin had better “be getting under weigh.”

“An attack of train fever, Inescourt?” Sutherland asked lightly as they joined him. “Last time I left your hospitable roof I had fifteen minutes at Willingsford Station.”

Philip laughed good humouredly, he was accustomed to being chaffed on the subject of speeding the “going guest.”

“Better that than seeing the tail of your train slide out of the station,” he said.

“And return unwelcome to your hostess.”

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Sutherland looked at Anne with a mocking light in his eyes. Her annoyance was patent enough and he wished to see how much was assumed, how much genuine.

"Anne wouldn't think you unwelcome, I bet." Philip turned to his wife for confirmation, but she made no reply, and it was Sutherland who answered:

"You never can tell with a woman," and as Philip ran down the steps to speak to the coachman, Martin held out his hand to Anne. For a second she hesitated, then gave him hers, and as she did so, a sudden sense of desolation, of finality, and parting swept over her. Her eyes clung to his face with an appeal that he was not slow to see.

"Auf Wiedersehen," he murmured in an undertone and held her hand firmly in his. "Although you refuse to tell me your plans, or fix any date for our next meeting—Anne——"

As he stood with his foot on the step of the brougham his host pressed him to return soon, and Sutherland replied that he would be enchanted to come whenever they asked him. He looked back at the woman searchingly. As their eyes met, his were filled with cynical amusement, hers with smouldering wrath. She resented his smile, his determination to force words from her, for his expression was a direct challenge. Seeing that he would not accept silence, she spoke coldly:

"I'm afraid we mustn't expect Mr. Sutherland here for some time, as I believe he has important work before him."

She spoke to her husband, but her eyes, inimical in their expression, rested on the other man.

"Yes, Lady Inescourt is right to remind me of my

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—obligations, I am busy for a long time to come. But my holiday has been enchanting, and like all other enchanting things it has to be paid for—dearly; the office stool—perhaps the stool of repentance—is my fate for some time to come, and memories of past pleasures will make it the more unpleasant.”

He continued to smile at her and she flinched, for she had not expected him to wound her so dexterously. Philip, blind to any disturbing undercurrent in the events of the moment, smiled good-naturedly as he joined his wife on the door step.

“I hope he’ll manage to come again soon. I like his jolly knack of turning phrases.”

But Anne stared at the receding carriage through a mist that blurred the red roofs of the village, the trees on the hillside. She was silent because of the horrible tightness that seized her throat. Her lips parted in an effort to breathe more freely and as she put her hand to her neck she unconsciously grasped the string of pearls so fiercely that the thread snapped and the pearls rolled down the steps to the gravel below.

“Stupid things, I didn’t know they wanted re-stringing,” she said petulantly, as her husband hastened to pick them up.

The pearls restored to her, she escaped to her sitting room, for there were certain things she had in mind to put into execution without delay, for her desire was to cast Sutherland out of her life, and the first step consisted in putting away any things likely to remind her of him. Standing in the sun-flooded room, while the bullfinch in the window piped gaily, she swept her eyes round the tables crowded with all the fripperies of a

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woman's abode. Sutherland had given her a few trifling knick-knacks, and these she collected and deposited in a drawer. There was a certain excitement in seeking for the things, in recalling the reason for this or that gift, in re-reading the inscriptions in the books, in remembering arguments on different subjects. There was an element of drama in the situation that appealed to her, as she pushed the drawer to, and looked triumphantly round the room. Strange what a gap the little things had made! She would not have thought it possible he had given her so much. Then her eyes fell on a big photograph of Sutherland that stood on a table beside her favourite chair. How on earth had she forgotten it? She advanced towards it, then paused, looked at it, and her courage ebbed, her breath caught in her throat as it had caught last night and again to-day while she watched the carriage depart. Was it possible that even in absence he could influence her? Rubbish! She was no girl of eighteen, but a woman of eight and twenty, who had often fallen in and out of love before her marriage! It would be easy to fall out again this time—if indeed she was in love. She picked up the picture as Philip entered.

"I forgot to say I shouldn't be home to lunch," he began, then his eye fell on the photograph in Anne's hand and he glanced at her flushed face. "Hullo, what's up?"

"I was tidying, that's all."

"But it's always tidy here."

"Not always, besides it struck me that like most women's rooms it's crowded up with photographs and rubbish of all kinds."

The excuse was a lame one, for there was no dis-

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order and the only photograph was one of Lady Rosendale in a meditative attitude. Philip was perplexed. There had been a certain coldness, now he came to think of it, in Anne's response when he invited Sutherland to repeat his visit without delay; it had not struck him at the time, but taken in conjunction with the present episode he remembered it; not that it affected him, for Anne was prone to disagreements with her friends, and he was accustomed to hear some dear intimate slightly, instead of eulogistically referred to. Sutherland was out of favour for a few days, that was all. It was a trait in Anne that often surprised her husband, but then, as he told himself, women were incomprehensible creatures. Since, however, he had conceived a liking for this particular man he was sorry to feel that he was in disgrace, and as he took the picture from his wife, he looked at it closely.

"It's awfully good, you know, just his expression when he's going to say something clever."

"Or when he's been specially odious and cynical," she retorted. Philip's suspicions were justified, but though he would not press Anne with questions, his sense of loyalty impelled him to praise the offender.

"He's a nice chap and there are some ripping things about him, though I always feel I don't really know him. I suppose that's because I haven't got brains."

Anne caught him up sharply. "Don't be foolish, Phil, cleverness doesn't run in one direction only. Mr. Sutherland happens to be a clever writer, a witty talker, which is a rare combination I admit, but there are heaps of things he is ignorant of. You know all about farming, you are a first-rate judge of cattle and horses. What

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does he know of all those things? Nothing."

It was horrible to discuss Martin, but she dared not turn the subject too abruptly lest her husband's suspicions should be awakened.

"He's awfully clever in the ways I would give anything to be clever in, for your sake, because then I shouldn't feel such an ass when your friends come here."

"You are very dear and kind to my friends, Phil, and I often think they are here too much. They have a knack of usurping the place when they come and I'm sure you don't care for it, though you never say a word and are so nice to them." In her eagerness to evade the topic of Sutherland, she flew to her friends in the bulk, and Philip's thoughts reverted to his attempts to entertain the Affinities during their recent visits and his weary sense of failure in that direction.

"I wish for your sake I was cleverer, or that you had married a man like Sutherland, who could have been more of a companion to you," he said, still harping on the subject uppermost in his mind. Anne flinched and answered that he was foolish to depreciate himself in this manner, but he was firm. "No, I'm sure you ought to have married the Sutherland type of man."

"Artists seldom make good husbands, and he is an artist at heart," she said, with an attempted laugh that was neither pleasant nor mirthful.

"No, I'm speaking quite seriously, for I know I'm not a companion to you. He or somebody like him would have been."

Inescourt spoke sadly, his eyes fixed on the portrait in his hand, and Anne's face twisted as though pain had gripped her. Then she said gently:

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"I don't want to change, I am quite happy as your wife, Phil. If anybody is to blame, it's myself, as I told you last night. There are many sins of omission to my name—perhaps some of commission too," she added in an undertone as she moved away from him and began to push the ornaments on the mantelpiece into their proper places.

He looked at her with a kindly smile: "Goodness knows, I don't want to change, I'm as happy as any man can possibly wish to be," he said.

She made no reply, but her face was white and drawn as she said, appealingly, "Please don't say these things again, Phil—I hate them."

"Darling, of course I won't."

When he left her she was still standing by the mantelpiece, and as the door closed, her hands clenched themselves, her eyes grew big with tears. "My God, my God, what a brute I am," she cried fiercely, and covered her face with her hands as she had covered it last night when shame for Sutherland's kiss had surged over her. When she looked up, the first thing that caught her eye was Martin's photograph, which Philip had replaced in its usual position. The irony of the situation struck her and she left the picture untouched. since to hide it, savoured of cowardice, and at present she was in the mood that thirsted to fight with beasts at Ephesus.

CHAPTER IV

GOOD RESOLUTIONS

PHILIP'S life was smooth after that, for he found Anne transformed into the wife of their early married days, ready to walk, ride or drive with him. She courted his society, so openly that he questioned whether the gulf between them had not been caused by his own devotion to sport rather than by any lack of tenderness on Anne's part. She was determined to see the best in everything and everybody, and Philip filled with wonder at this new phase, dared ask no question lest by any demonstration of affection or surprise, he should scare the shy bird of his happiness. It had nearly flown once, perhaps he had been to blame, so he would exercise more caution in future.

On Anne's side things were almost as spontaneous as they seemed. If her new rôle demanded a sustained effort she had not discovered it as yet, excitement buoyed her up and the desire to obliterate Martin from her mind, so that the weariness of well-doing had not yet asserted itself and she found a great reward in Philip's happiness which held that element of pathos against which few women are proof. By the end of the third week, however, time began to hang on her hands, because Philip's county duties often called him away from home for several days together. Formerly she had hailed these absences as an excuse to betake herself to London, now she dared not go there for fear of meeting Suther-

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land. Another occupation of her solitude had lain in composing verses. Now, she had put them aside, because she argued that had it not been for the poems she would never have been admitted to the inmost circle of the Affinities, and but for the Affinities she would never have met Martin—ergo, the poems were the fundamental cause of her follies and must be thrust out of her life.

Unfortunately she had not calculated that in renouncing poetry she was laying waste long hours barren of interest. She could not read all day, it was too chilly to sketch, the garden was of no interest to her, and much time remained in which to brood over pleasant episodes in which Sutherland had played a leading part. When she walked on the marsh it was haunted by memories, the shore was a land of romance that possessed her in a disturbing manner. She had not realised its spell till Martin had pointed it out to her, but once revealed by his glowing words, she felt it with an ever increasing sense of attraction that augured ill for the forgetfulness she was by way of cultivating. Since the marsh was dangerous, she walked along the white roads that serpentine through the gentle undulations of land, and she wandered far afield till by physical exhaustion her mind worked the more vividly and fed on the very things she sought to banish. By the second week in November matters reached a climax, when on a cold morning she saw the cocklers wading in the shallow water that trickled over the sand, whilst with hooked knives they scraped away the mud, flinging the cockles into baskets. For a time Anne watched the women's ungainly figures, their petticoats drawn tightly between their thighs to form improvised breeches, their battered

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hats tied on by woollen shawls, their legs encased in footless stockings. Then after scrambling over hummocks of slimy black mud and wading through ice cold streams she tried to draw them into conversation. A hard life spent in cockling or working on the fields had not produced the most polished manners, and Anne, accustomed among the Affinities to an artificial atmosphere grew frightened by the shy, curt answers she received to her attempts at friendliness. Since nothing is so infectious as shyness, Anne in her turn became dumb and awkward, conscious too that the women looked on her with distrust if not with dislike. The thought stung her pride and roused a desire to create a more favourable impression, so that moved partly by the inevitable tendency of the forlorn towards the consolations of philanthropy, partly by the desire to stand well in the eyes of her fellows, she determined to play the Lady Bountiful in Stiffborough.

But dread of rebuffs checked her if she attempted to enter the cottages, which though lying at her gate, she had hitherto ignored, and for some days she looked enviously at the little red-roofed houses clinging to the hillside. They seemed as inaccessible as paradise itself, and she asked Philip's advice. The question was not productive of much, for he said cheerfully :

“Oh just go and see them, they'll be awfully glad if you do.”

But Anne knew better. For once she put herself in the other women's places and realised that the sudden incursion of a person who had ignored them for three years was not likely to be welcomed now. Then her mind flew to Miriam Heathcote, who visited the poor of Mars-

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ton and Stiffborough. But here lay another stumbling block, for Anne was conscious of a certain directness of mind that placed Miriam far from her and from everything that she cared for. Nor had she herself been too discreet in her comments on the “early Victorianism” of her neighbour whom she had described as “one of those straight-up-and-down-figured women” who have no emotions, a “Philistine of the Philistines” etc.; and she had likened the kindly grey-green eyes to “so much soapy water.” These remarks had reached Miriam’s ears, and coming, as they did, from Philip’s wife had hurt her, though she was too generous to bear enmity against the flicks of a spoilt woman’s tongue. But as Anne recalled them now she wondered whether Miriam knew of them. If so, how could she ask her help? But necessity was sharp, and for once pride took a secondary place in her life, so she determined to seek her husband’s old playfellow, and Miriam was surprised when Anne entered the Marston drawing room one bright November day.

“Am I disturbing you?” Lady Inescourt asked, guiltily conscious of piles of account books and papers on the writing table from which her hostess had risen to greet her.

“Not at all, I was only struggling through the annual accounts of the village club; and any excuse is welcome that takes me away from figures; I hate them.”

“So do I, horrid things, so precise-looking, so incomprehensible. I never could add or multiply.”

Anne spoke jerkily, ill at ease now that she had come, and feeling it would have been easier to ask Miriam to Stiffborough, or else leave matters alone.

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Miss Heathcote watching curiously, saw that her guest was pale, her face drawn and pinched, while dark lines under her eyes gave them a cavernous appearance. Her mouth was rather tremulous, her hands played feverishly with the chain from which hung a huge muff. She did not sit down but fidgetted about the room maintaining a flutter of spasmodic small-talk.

There was a sense of old-fashioned comfort and rather puritanical austerity about Marston and about Miriam too, as she sat beside a basket filled with knitting and crochet, while Anne standing by the fire place, resting one foot on the brass fender, looked down at her and wondered how she could best frame her request. Then Miriam flew to the inevitable topic of the weather, for the flutter of small talk had died down and Lady Inescourt stood mute. The remark was agreed to but silence followed save for the click of Miriam's knitting needles and the chinking of Anne's bracelets as she made an impatient movement.

"Why don't you sit down; you make me feel horribly rude sitting here while you stand, besides you look tired out."

Anne took the chair that faced her hostess and the latter continued: "What have you been doing lately? Racketting in London?"

This would account for her evident fatigue, but Anne replied that she had been doing nothing at all.

"That's one of the most tiring amusements I know," Miss Heathcote remarked for lack of anything else to say.

"It's horrible," Anne burst out fiercely.

"Lack of occupation doesn't trouble you as a rule,

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for you can't find time for all you want to do."

The remark was made in all good faith, and she intended no rebuke, but Anne flushed. Conscience pricked her as she remembered that lack of time had formed an invariable excuse for the neglect of duties that bored her.

"No, it's not my usual way," she assented, then fell silent again. How on earth was she to broach the subject that had brought her here? The difficulty increased as the minutes slipped by, and Miriam's needles clicked in and out of the red wool. The calm atmosphere grew oppressive to Anne; the sight of the ponderous shawl growing swiftly in size, filled her with a suffocating sense of her own unsuitability for such occupations as those which she was anxious to undertake. At that moment the bullfinch hanging in his cage in the window tilted his tail at an absurd angle and with feathers fluffed out, pompously rendered the "Marseillaise," ending with a trill that implied a demand for hemp-seed. The conversation thereupon turned to birds, their habits, feeding, etc., on which Anne enlarged, adding:

"I believe I give my bully too much hemp, he is losing all his feathers and looks an indecent little wretch."

Miriam having let the bird out of his cage resumed her knitting, and the sight recalled Anne to the present.

She watched the quick movement of the needles as they hopped in and out of the wheel, and felt that there was something humiliating in this begging for help, this outcry against her own impotence that she had come to utter. "Every man and woman should be self-contained, sufficient unto themselves" had been one of

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her pet axioms. Apparently she could not live up to it, and furious with her weakness, she was inclined to postpone her confession. But postponement meant a return to the idleness which had tormented her during the last weeks and that was out of the question.

"Christmas presents for the village?" she asked touching the work in Miss Heathcote's hand. Reference to the village brought her a step nearer the hated subject she had come to broach.

Miriam nodded. "Yes, I've done twenty already, and this is the last."

"You're horribly industrious."

"It's good to be busy; one hasn't time then to imagine a heap of non-existent woes." She looked up with a smile. "A good old copy-book platitude isn't it?"

Anne's face grew serious. "Perhaps, but it's true."

There was another pause, then she said abruptly:

"I wish you would give me something to do. Anything," her lips suddenly quivered as she stared at the fire. "In fact I came over to ask your help. I want to get to know the Stiffborough village folk. They think me a stranger at present because I haven't been near them or done anything for them; so I want you to take me round the houses, for you know them all, and can tell me about them and how I can help them, what I can do and so on. I feel I'm an awful drone and I hate drones so horribly that I want to do something useful, to try to make the people on the place happier. I—I'm not exactly happy there myself, and perhaps if I had something definite to do it would make things more possible."

Miriam kept her eyes on her work. She felt it was

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kinder not to look at her companion ; besides her astonishment might be too palpable were she to meet Anne's gaze at the end of her fierce outburst. Then she heard her resume haltingly :

"Phil would like it—and—he is so good to me that I want to make him happy—please him."

The tone sent a rush of emotion to Miriam's heart, because Philip's happiness meant much to her. For his sake she had earnestly endeavoured to see the best in the wife he had chosen ; for his sake she would gladly help and advise Anne now to the best of her ability. The consciousness that matters were not running smoothly at Stiffborough, had prompted her, she felt, to stern judgments of late. Quick to repent any injustice, she turned to her visitor eager to show sympathy.

"My dear, I will help you to the very best of my ability," she said, her voice a little tremulous. "I know how good it is to make other people happy and to have one's own days so full that there is no time for brooding—for regrets."

She had learnt the lesson through bitter experience, but Anne she felt was too frail, too slight a creature for the rough forces of existence.

"That's what I want. My days must be full, full, full ; no idle moments, no hours in which to think. I'm at a loose end ; there seems to be nothing tangible to hold on to, nothing to do at Stiffborough, and life has grown so wearisome lately. If I go out, the moaning of the sea forms an accompaniment to everything ; if I stay at home there are all sorts of creakings about the house that frighten me. That's why I want work, an interest, something to do—something to think about. Ah, can't

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you understand?"'

Her voice rose with the petulance of a child who feels its woes uncomprehended, and Miriam surveyed her with kindly eyes in which pity contended with surprise. In the silence the bullfinch, perched on the back of her chair, twittered, flirted his feathers, and hopping on to the mantelpiece piped his tune again.

"What about your writing, have you given it up?"'

"I hate it—I wish to God I had never done it. I wish—oh I don't know what I wish," Anne cried wildly, as she began to pace the room with fretful haste. "That's the worst of it, that's been its curse—" she burst out, then checked herself and came to a stand beneath the great cut glass chandelier that hung from the ceiling. She had been on the verge of betraying herself to this woman who she thought was too puritanical, too narrow to understand her, had she done so. Looking at Miriam she saw her staring into the fire, her hands folded on the mass of red wool on her knees.

"Why do you hate the things you used to love?" Anne hesitated. "Oh I don't know," she said evasively, and continued after a pause: "What nonsense I talk, don't I? All this fuss about nothing! All this trouble over the loss of a feeble power for stringing verses! All this outcry because my art has suddenly deserted me! Quite absurd from your point of view, I expect!" Her eyes were defiant. "You can't understand what it means, for only an artist can understand an artist, but it's devilish—absolutely devilish to be left stranded as I am now without my art."

The tone grated on her listener, but she was not blinded by the outburst, only she wished her guest would

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speak the truth, it would be easier.

"I'm sorry, Anne," she said kindly, "though probably as you say, I am unable to grasp all that this loss means to you since I am devoid of artistic gifts. Nevertheless I understand enough to sympathise with you."

The gentle tones fell soothingly on Anne's ear, and leaning her hand against the marble mantelpiece she laughed more naturally.

"What a fool I am! What an utter, abject fool!" she said. "Forgive me, and let's talk rationally over the whole silly thing."

Miriam smiled. "By all means; come and sit down on the sofa and let's see what can be done for you."

She laid aside her work, and slipping her arm round her visitor's waist drew her to the sofa where Anne, having regained a measure of self-control, poured forth her wishes concerning the poor of Stiffborough. She recounted her attempt to make friends with the cocklers and its failure; she laid bare to Miriam's astonished eyes plans for the welfare of her neighbours, and ideas that she had pondered during the last few weeks. Many of the schemes were foolish, but Miriam, anxious to encourage her, made no adverse comments, though it was hard at times to repress her amusement as her guest's artistic tendencies declared themselves in a conception of suitable things with which to interest the fishermen's wives and encourage them to participate in "more elevating" pursuits. But to initiate any work capable of filling Lady Inescourt's days was the main thing, so Miriam nodded approval or hinted cautiously that this or that might not quite answer, and Anne's

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spirits had risen vastly when she prepared to depart.

“Nell and the children are coming to us for Christmas, you must see me through that,” she said as she drew on her gloves. Having once asked for help she would be greedy of it, and Miriam knew that her sister-in-law’s advent would be a heavy trial to one who suffered fools so unreadily as Lady Inescourt.

“Is she paying you a long visit?”

It was the only thing to say, since she could hardly pretend to congratulate, nor was it seemly to condole.

“A fortnight or ten days,” Anne replied with a rueful expression; then she coloured and added, “I thought one ought to arrange a Christmas tree or something idiotic of that sort for them; it would amuse them and pass the time.” She paused and played with the bullfinch, who pretended to fight savagely with her finger. Then, unable to restrain herself, she turned impatiently from the bird and cried, “Ugh, how I abominate Christmas; it’s a horrible thing.”

“It brings heaps of bills; but this year it will be pleasanter for you having the children, for they love it so dearly.”

Anne made no reply. When she spoke again, it was without her former petulance.

“If I have the tree you must promise to help.”

“I promise; I am ready to do anything, even to dressing up as Santa Claus, if it pleases you.”

“Friendship couldn’t go further; you are an angel, how can I thank you?”

“By being happy, and—making Phil happy too,” she said gently, as her eyes searched Anne’s. But the other woman looked steadily at the floor.

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As Miriam watched her depart, her face grew serious. Mrs. Chester's innuendoes concerning "the newspaper man" had an unpleasant knack of springing to life within her, though she persistently denied that there was anything in the friendship. But to-day as she stood in the drawing-room window and watched the vanishing pony cart, she wondered at Anne's distress. She was not blind to the fact that something more tangible than a lost art lay at the root of her trouble. Physician of sick souls as she had always been, she knew the difficulty of curing a wound partially hidden by the bandages of reserve, and Anne true to her sex had indulged in one of those half confidences dear to the feminine soul, and baffling to those who would gladly help.

CHAPTER V

THE RESULT OF GOOD RESOLUTIONS

I'M sure they will repent it some day. Think how many useful things they could have learnt to make, if only they had stuck to the carving class."

Anne, cold and tired, spoke fretfully. It was a rough winter's night in which she, Miriam and Mr. Foreby, the village postmaster, had spent half-an-hour waiting for the appearance of the youths who had promised to attend Lady Inescourt's weekly carving and fret-work class. Nobody having come, it had been useless to wait longer.

"One can't do more than try to make it attractive for them, can one?" she resumed, appealing to Miss Heathcote, as wrapped in macintoshes and battling with umbrellas, the two women struggled down the Stiffborough street against the gusty wind. Miriam made no reply. She was grieved for Anne's sake that the various well meant attempts to help the villagers had failed.

"I hate them," Lady Inescourt cried fiercely. "They are a thankless set of brutes, the whole lot of them."

"That's rather a sweeping assertion to make of the whole population. Because a few boys won't attend a fretwork and carving class it doesn't follow that the village is composed entirely of thankless brutes."

"But this isn't the first thing they've refused to

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accept when I've done my best to help them. There was the Glee Club that nobody joined. There was the botany class for the girls, the cooking for the women, and all the other things I started. The only one they've taken up is the mothers' meeting, and that's the very thing I care for least."

Miriam looked into the darkness. Anne's petulance distressed her.

"And therefore the mothers' meeting appealed to them most, which shows how impossible it is for one class to legislate for another in these matters. It's useless, my dear Anne, to fancy the leopard will change his spots in a moment. Human nature changes only by infinitesimal and imperceptible degrees."

"It's hatefully obstinate."

"So one says when it runs contrary to one's own will. But, after all, without a dash of obstinacy heaven help us."

Anne made no reply, she was still sore at the enforced acknowledgment of her latest failure, eager to lay the blame on the obstinacy of the villagers, rather than on her own foolish persistence in schemes which were foredoomed to failure. Miriam she considered unsympathetic at the present juncture, nor did she hesitate to say so, and Miss Heathcote smiled under cover of the darkness. But the charge of deficient sympathy rankled, for she had lavished time and thought, affection and lenient judgment on the woman by her side; and to refrain from speech now was to acquiesce in an unjust accusation, so she said gently:

"That was a little unkind, Anne, for I have done my best to back you up in the things you wished to do,

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and sometimes, when I suggested that your schemes were unlikely to answer, you still persisted with them. I have spoken, I couldn't do more."

"You could have stopped me," was the cross retort.

"How? By main force?"

"Oh, I don't know how, but somehow."

"That's childish, and you know as well as I do that the only means of proving to you the impracticability of accomplishing the things you wanted was to let you try them. How can you induce people who can't sing to join a Glee Club? Or teach expensive fancy cooking to women who have the barest necessities of existence? Or after a hard day's work, lure a lot of uncouth boys from the comfort of a respectable inn where they can talk of their own interests? I warned you as well as I could, but you were a free agent, and I could only let you experiment and find out for yourself. Nobody consents to learn by vicarious experience. You had to make your mistakes as I had made mine; I couldn't avert them."

A hand slipped within Miriam's arm, a penitent voice pleaded for pardon.

"I beg your pardon, I was a pig, a perfect pig to say what I did, but I really didn't mean to be nasty, only I am miserably cross with everybody and everything. Ah, don't you understand how it is with me?"

The old despairing note that Miriam remembered hearing at Marston, rang in Anne's voice; its reappearance made her wish afresh that Lady Inescourt could confess what ailed her, and accept the comfort or help which were to be had for the asking. Feeling it to be a foolish and dangerous reticence, Miriam spoke gently.

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"What is the matter with you Anne? If you care to tell me what troubles you I am quite safe; as you know my tongue doesn't wag injudiciously of you or my neighbours' affairs. Perhaps I could help, so, why not let me try? But I hate forcing anything from you that you don't wish to tell me, and if you prefer to keep silence I will ask no more questions."

She drew the hand that clung to her arm into her own and held it in a firm, tender clasp. She felt Anne flinch. To confess was so hard, but to continue bearing the burden of her misery alone was even harder. She glanced at the other woman's face, tender and kindly as it bent towards her through the stormy night; and the desire for a complete unbosoming overpowered her.

"Mim, you are an angel," she began thickly, as a man's step sounded on the road before them, and Philip's figure detached itself from the surrounding gloom. He had come to meet them because it was dark he said.

"And I say, Anne, the Christmas tree is in; we've got it up in the hall and it looks simply rippin'; so we can begin decorating to-morrow."

His wife made no reply and Miriam felt the hand withdraw itself from her arm. The moment for confession had come and gone, dispelled by Inescourt's appearance.

On the following afternoon a trivial matter roused Miriam's suspicions so that ever afterwards, though she suppressed them assiduously, they never wholly slumbered, but set her heart aching with dread.

The Inescourts, Eleanor Howard and Miriam were decorating the spruce tree whose advent had excited

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Philip, and Eleanor having mislaid the scissors for the twentieth time, stood disconsolately in the middle of the room.

“I *can’t* think where I put the stupid things down,” she said, “I *know* I had them only a few minutes ago, where *can* they have got to?”

“They can’t have moved as they haven’t legs or wings,” Philip replied from the top of the ladder where he was tying a tinsel fairy on the tree. Mrs. Howard, her fair hair rumpled, her blue eyes distraught in their gaze, wandered round the hall in a vain search for the scissors.

“What did you use them for last?” Anne’s voice had been growing more weary with each frantic search. On the present occasion she decided that her strength was to sit still and she continued to bore holes in the heads of little plaster fishes for which the children were to angle.

“I *think* it was to cut the wire,” Eleanor replied, and ran her fingers through her hair till it stood up in a palisade round her head. “I *think* I was standing by the tree and then I came down and talked to you, Anne, and then—I really *can’t* think what I did next, *too* stupid of me, isn’t it?”

“Oh, they’ll turn up some time or other,” Philip remarked cheerfully as he finished tying on the fairy, and called his wife’s attention to it. But seeing his sister’s distress he proceeded to hunt for the scissors, which made their presence felt as he ran his hand over the sofa.

“There now, *how* clever of you to find them!” Eleanor cried as he sucked his finger, which had met

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the sharp points of the missing weapons.

"The infernal things found me. What on earth induced you to put them there?"

Eleanor replied that she knew all the time she had put them in a safe place.

"It depends on whose safety you considered," Miriam remarked. "It evidently wasn't the safety of the person who sat on the sofa."

But Mrs. Howard was impervious to chaff, and when Anne joined in the storm of teasing she put on a plaintive face and said:

"You are all *too* unkind, for after all it *was* a safe place, because somebody was *sure* to find them sooner or later you see."

Amid general laughter and ironical cheers from Philip at her remark, the servant appeared with a pile of letters and parcels on which Eleanor fell with avidity. For Philip the post had brought a Jorrocks calendar, which he loved and laughed over with unfailing regularity. For Anne there was a neat parcel addressed in Sutherland's hand.

She laid the packet on the table and continued her task of boring the fishes' heads till Mrs. Howard having opened and exclaimed loudly over all her own gifts, turned to her sister-in-law and asked what she had received.

"Nothing of any interest," Anne replied, and bored a fish rather crookedly. She did not think Eleanor had noticed the parcel.

"Oh but *do* open it, it's another present, I expect, it's *too* exciting."

"It wouldn't interest you in the least; it's only a

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book I was promised as a Christmas present."

Her tone would have silenced most people, but Eleanor, with the curiosity of a monkey and the persistence of a child continued plaintively:

"Oh but *do* be a dear and open it; or if you are busy let me do it."

Miriam's curiosity was roused by Anne's determination not to touch the parcel and by the flush which had spread itself over her face. Then she heard Mrs. Howard saying, "I never *can* leave a parcel unopened," and her fingers strayed towards the packet. Anne's eyes were fixed on them. It was safer to open the parcel herself than leave it to Eleanor, for Martin might have written something inside it, and hers had better be the hand to find such a missive. Driven to bay she cut the string and revealed a vellum bound copy of Swinburne's "Poems and Ballads."

"Oh, Anne, how *too* pretty," cried Eleanor, and snatching it from her turned the pages. "And just look there's a note pinned to a page."

Then she read out the title of the poem to which the note was pinned, "Stage Love." Anne flinched.

"Give me the book." Her voice was peremptory; her hand trembled as she held it out and there was a look of fear in her eyes, but Eleanor, absorbed in the poem, took no notice.

"'When she played at half a love with half a lover'" she read aloud. "But I don't understand how you *can* half play at half anything?"

She looked up with a perplexed puckering of her brow. "I *can't* see why in poetry the meaning doesn't stop at the end of the line and begin at the next. Some-

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times it runs through a lot and then stops in the middle of one. This isn't so bad. But I *don't* understand what it all means; I suppose it's because I'm *so* stupid at poetry."

"Very likely," Anne snapped, as she got possession of the book at last, and rising, held it to her as though fearful lest it should be taken by force.

Philip had not been a witness of the absurd little comedy and his voice came from the far side of the tree.

"I say, isn't Swinburne rather dirty sort of garbage?" he asked.

"Not if you read it in the right light. Everything in art is as you make it." Anne's voice was priggish but Miriam saw that her hand shook as she clutched the little white volume, and the hot flush deepened on her cheeks, while her eyes grew hard and defiant in their expression.

"I suppose I was thinking of somebody else, but I hate the idea of your reading beastliness, that's all." He had come round the tree now and stood beside his wife.

Anne laughed harshly. "Am I such a sweet innocent?"

"You are your dear little self," he answered in an undertone that only reached her ears. Aloud he added, "Who sent it to you?"

"Mr. Sutherland. He promised it to me ages ago."

"By Jove, I quite forgot him! Let's wire to him to come down. You would like him Nell," he added, turning to his sister, "he's an awfully clever chap, and I've got to like him, though he scared me at first because he was so smart with his answers. You know him, Mim,

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don't you?"

Miriam said she had seen him once or twice, but vouchsafed no further comment, and Philip unconscious of treading on thin ice continued:

"Let's ask him down, there's heaps of time if we wire at once, and I'm sure you would like to have him here."

He turned to his wife as she stood against the gorgeous background of a crimson sunset that gleamed through the latticed window. As Miriam watched her she saw the tension of her figure, the slight shiver that passed over her. Was it possible that she cared for this man? Cared for him so much that she dared not face him?

For a moment Anne made no answer to her husband's question, and he repeated, "You would like to have him here, wouldn't you?"

Then she spoke, her voice hard in tone.

"Not at all, Christmas trees and things of that sort aren't the least in his line; besides I expect he is busy."

Without waiting for further remarks she flung open the window, admitting a rush of ice cold air as she leant out and said impatiently, "I've had enough decorating work for to-day, I want to run round the garden before tea."

She wished to be alone, because the receipt of the book had troubled her and she felt the need of solitude to restore her mental equilibrium; but Philip followed her out of the hall, and as the door closed on them he said kindly:

"Darling, why not let me wire to Sutherland? It would make Christmas jollier for you if he was here,

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I expect; you may find it dull with only Nell and the kids.''

He drew her hand through his arm as they walked down the path together, and when she turned her face to him he kissed her, an embrace she accepted unwillingly. It was with an effort that she spoke.

"No, Phil, don't ask him; let's be alone, just a family party as we are; it's ever so much nicer, and besides I daresay he has gone to his own people."

Philip laughed. "Somehow I never thought of his having people of his own. Who and what are they?"

Sutherland had been a strong personality, an independent creature detached from all suggestion of home ties; and while Philip wondered concerning his relations, Anne was suddenly struck by the thought that Martin had never mentioned his family to her. It was strange, considering their intimacy, that he should have been so reticent, and the idea that he had kept things from her when she had laid bare her very soul to him stung her to anger. Why had he shut her out of his inner life, his real life? Then she saw that Philip waited for an answer to his question.

"I really know nothing about his relations, for we have discussed things more than people as a rule. But I expect they are middle-class frumps who go in for tea cosies, white crochet antimacassars, and terrible cardboard cornucopias called 'tidies' that hang on the bedroom looking glasses."

In this fashion she laughed the matter aside, and finally asked a question concerning the farm which turned her husband's thoughts into a safer channel.

It was after Christmas that Anne's self-imposed

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tasks really began to pall. She had expected miraculous results from her philanthropic orgy; she found instead the disappointment that arises from good deeds undertaken as a narcotic to painful thoughts. There were episodes at times in her "parishing" whose unconscious humour or pathos stirred her for a moment, but they were swamped amid the details of illness dear to the average cottager's heart. Moreover, if the tasks she had undertaken crowded thought out of her days, there remained hours of the night when sleep refused to bring oblivion, and her misdeeds, seen through the magnifying glass of an ultra vivid imagination, bulked grotesquely before her. In the stillness, proportion became distortion, the normal abnormal, her follies heinous sins, her repentance a futile attempt to wash out the indelible stains with the soft soap of philanthropy. Remorse filled her for her conduct towards Philip, it did not spare her with regard to Sutherland, for she was tortured by the thought that he hungered for her presence, and regretted his rashness. Pity for him merged into pity for herself as the victim of an ill-assorted marriage. She wished Philip's love could turn to hate, his caresses to blows, since such things would permit of the martyr's attitude and the crown of saintship. But Philip's love increased; and insensibly she softened towards him again.

The sight of Eleanor's little girls had filled her with sudden regrets at her own childlessness. Children would have filled so many of the hours into which she was forced to crowd external things. Children, by linking her to Philip, would have forged bonds capable of withstanding the strain imposed upon her critical

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faculties by his mental limitations. Children would have thrust aside those haunting memories of hours spent in Sutherland's company, and might even have reconciled her to the bleak desolation of East Anglia. She longed for them now both for herself and for her husband, since she was not blind to his disappointment, nor untouched by his silent acquiescence in the inevitable. But she kept these things secret. The confession to Miriam that had trembled on her lips in the windswept village street remained unspoken, and she was thankful that circumstances had sealed her lips, for this other woman, she told herself, would be incapable of understanding.

The neighbourhood meanwhile talked freely over Lady Inescourt's new attitude towards the poor and also towards themselves; nor was Mrs. Chester's tongue silent. Her abode was the county's clearing house for gossip, and she was intensely inquisitive concerning Anne. She often hinted a desire to hear about her, but Miss Heathcote proved reticent, and it was not until a February day when Mrs. Chester had bidden her to luncheon, that the conversation ran consecutively on the Inescourts--the older woman having said tartly: "I suppose now you are always at Stiffborough you are as thick as thieves with that newspaper man who runs about with Philip's wife?"

She could seldom bring herself to speak of Anne save as "Philip's wife" or "the Stiffborough woman."

Miriam shook her head; Sutherland, she said, had neither been at Stiffborough, nor had she any recollection of hearing Anne discuss him.

"Um, that's bad; a woman never keeps silence

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about a man she is intimate with unless there's something fishy about their relations."

"I daresay she avoids discussing him with me because she feels I am not at all his sort."

"Which means you dislike him?" She shot an enquiring glance at Miriam.

"I hardly know him."

"My dear, for heaven's sake don't be cautious. Look at me. Do I go feeling my way about conversationally like a cat on a muddy road? Of course not! that's why I'm never alone and dull. You can't be an agreeable companion unless you talk openly about things; so tell me frankly what you think of the man?"

"But I hardly know him. Perhaps I don't care to know him any better; for he strikes me as being conceited and I should imagine a prig."

"All people who write are prigs," retorted Mrs. Chester. Sweeping assertions unbacked by facts were her strong point. "Now that little fool at Stiffborough is the worst prig I know. One can forgive it to a certain extent in a really clever person—but in a fool!" She snorted and her snort conveyed unutterable things. "As for her poetry, I never read such rubbish. I bought the book to please Philip, but bless me if I could make head or tail of it. Most of it was indecent and what wasn't made no sense."

Miriam laughed. "You always hate poetry, so how could you expect to like Anne's; especially when you dislike her so much?"

The old lady's vehemence amused her, though she regretted that Anne had made a bitter enemy of her.

"My dear, poetry is just a complicated way of

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saying nothing. Like that messy French cooking, when you stick a spoon into it, there's nothing but froth. As for the nonsense Philip's wife puts on paper, it's past praying for. If she had produced half-a-dozen healthy babies instead of a book of twaddle she would have done her duty to her husband and the country."

"It's a pity there are no children; however, it's not too late to give up hope."

Mrs. Chester sniffed expressively.

"If she had children she wouldn't know what to do with them. She would let the newspaper man poison their minds just as he has poisoned hers, and as some fine day he will poison Philip's life." She paused, her face softened strangely and she laid her hand on Miriam's. "Ah, child, it isn't my business, but it makes my heart sick to see how things are going for that boy. There's trouble ahead of him, serious trouble. Goodness knows I would do anything in my power to help him, for his mother was my oldest friend. But he was a fool in his marriage, because those artistic people are no good. They make their artistic temperament—as they are pleased to call their tantrums—an excuse for all kinds of wrongdoing. As for you, Miriam, be warned in time and don't run your head into the noose that will tie the pack of his troubles on your back."

Miss Heathcote forced a laugh and assured her hostess that she was capable of taking good care of herself. But her mind was disturbed, for already ill at ease as she was, such prophecies gained added weight and she wondered anxiously what Anne was doing in London, whither she had gone a few days earlier, ostensibly to see the dentist and purchase new clothes.

CHAPTER VI

THE AFFINITIES AT HOME

THE murmur of applause, the rustle of skirts, the soft clapping of women's hands, greeted the fall of Henry Doran's voice as he ceased reading the sonnets which formed his latest contribution to literature. In a wave, the Affinities rose from the chairs and sofas of Lady Rosendale's drawing-room, and surged towards the centre of the room where the poet sat. "Too deery," "heavenly," "perfection of art," and a thousand other unrestrained attributes of praise were bestowed upon the verses that had fallen from the reader's lips, as the hungry-eyed women engulfed him in their flowing draperies.

It had been a typical Affinity Meeting, from the cards, bearing the legend "At home to those who love us," and in the corner, "Henry will read the sonnets," to the excitement from which Anne, in a distant corner of the room, held aloof. A sullen expression marred her face; she thought the sonnets "poor stuff," by no means worth the adulation they evoked. Perhaps they trespassed somewhat on her own preserves; or perhaps a prolonged course of Stiffborough had cleared her vision and endowed her with a fuller appreciation of life and its meaning, as contrasted with art, its imitations, and fictitious emotions as portrayed by Henry Doran, the minor poet, whom the Affinities had screamed into the Government. Anne had worshipped at his shrine until

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she found that Sutherland laughed at his pretensions, both as poet and politician, and quick to take her clue from Martin, she departed from the old allegiance. Her presence to-day was caused by no desire to hear the sonnets, but to "refresh herself in the fountain of happy friendships," as she had expressed it to Lady Rosendale when accepting the invitation.

She had set off from the hotel in high spirits; her head held high, her cheeks flushed with excitement, her eyes dancing under their black brows. She was a woman who depended largely on her moods for beauty, and if she had been a radiant incarnation of health and charm when she arrived, now that her excitement had faded, she suggested a rose battered by a summer storm, as she sat on the sofa and swung the chain which held her gold card case, powder box, mirror, purse, and all the other adjuncts of a woman's toilette.

She was jealous of Doran's success; of the patting and petting, the praise and honeyed words which were being lavished on him by the women, holding one another's hands, or with arms encircling one another's waists. She, too, had once stood, as he did now, the centre of an admiring crowd; she, too, had been fussed over, patted and petted, encouraged and praised, when she had read her works to the self-same audience in the self-same room. That was the first occasion on which she had met Sutherland's narrow eyes fixed on her with admiration. Even in those early moments his admiration had meant more to her than that of her fellows, and their glances then had been the preliminary to intimacy.

To-day matters were different; she was merely one of the ruck—if any Affinity could belong to such a

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condition! She had arrived filled with a sense of excitement; and Lady Rosendale, unkempt, as became the chief light amid the Affinities, had gushed and murmured: "You must stay after all the others have left, so that we can have a dear, delicious, private talk." Passing on, however, Anne found that the greetings were cold, her novelty had worn off, her vogue had decreased, and the fatal fact that she "rotted in the country" detracted from her charm, since this entailed being out of touch with the things that interested the Affinities.

For instance, Barbara Hardcastle hardly recalled her pink-lidded eyes from a vague contemplation of the infinite, to rest on Anne, while her hand, of the consistency of a dead rabbit, lay inertly in the new-comer's. Mrs. Carnbury—Lady Rosendale's echo smiled languidly as though even that effort was beyond her strength; and Mrs. Dundas scarcely turned her head or paused in her recital of a coarse story to the two men whom she had penned in a corner.

All this chilled Anne, and she sought refuge beside Stella Adair, who being on her probation as an Affinity, gushed effusively and whispered in her pinched, lisping voice that it was "too delithouth" to see her again. Then came the reading of the poems, during which Lady Rosendale and Mrs. Carnbury, holding one another's hands, sprawled on a sofa; Barbara Hardcastle sat closer than necessity demanded to Mr. Grey, and the others grouped themselves about the room. Anne was divided between a desire to laugh at it all—or to shed tears of anger and disappointment.

She had hoped to find Martin here, though she had refused to acknowledge the desire even to herself. But

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there was no sign of him, though she watched the door every time it opened. Gradually the flag of expectation which had flown in her cheeks was lowered, and as she leant back in her chair her face grew pale under the hat with its drooping feathers and the flowing veil that formed a vaporous background to her delicate features.

In obedience to her hostess's request, she remained seated in the corner till the other guests had departed. Then Lady Rosendale joined her, and drawing her into a fond embrace proceeded to have the "dear, delicious, private talk" she had demanded. There were many things the good lady wished to ascertain, and she had no intention of letting Anne leave till she had fathomed the mystery of her long silence.

"My dear, what on earth have you been doing all this time? I began to think you were dead and buried," she began.

"So I have to all intents and purposes, and now that I have resuscitated, my appearance hasn't disturbed anybody."

She spoke bitterly and Lady Rosendale laughed.

"Dearest, what nonsense. Your resurrection is enchanting, and you look handsomer than I have ever seen you."

"I'm glad somebody finds pleasure in me." The memory of her cool reception by Barbara Hardeastle and the languid indifference of Mrs. Carnbury's smile still rankled.

"It was your fancy," Lady Rosendale assured her soothingly. "Why imagine such nonsense? Everybody was delighted to see you, and we all hoped that you would perhaps have some news for us, something to read."

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"It's no good if one lives in the wilds of the country to try and keep touch with one's friends. Really it's hopeless."

Lady Rosendale looked at her sharply.

"But, my dear one, that solitude is just what you need for your work; surely in such an inspiring and romantic spot as your beautiful Stiffborough, ideas must seethe within you, craving for the expression you give them so divinely?"

Anne was silent, her eyes fixed on the tip of her shoe as it peeped out from the hem of her dress, then she said curtly:

"It's a hateful place, besides I have given up writing."

"Given it up, But, darling, why? What do you do?"

Having been the person to acclaim Anne as a rising genius, having prophesied fame and much work from her pen, she was ill-disposed to risk her reputation as a truffle-dog. It should not be from lack of encouragement that Lady Inescourt would remain idle. When Anne replied that she found her time occupied with parish work and visiting her neighbours, Lady Rosendale laughed contemptuously.

"My dear, don't be a goose. There are plenty of people to do those silly every-day things. Any fool can be a charity-monger, but for you to waste precious time on such matters is like the man who wrapped up his talent in a napkin and buried it. There are, alas, all too few real poets in this age of haste and thoughtlessness."

"I don't care to write, I can't get into touch with it all," said Anne fretfully.

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It was horrible to be taken to task in this manner especially as she knew that no small part of her cool reception had been caused by her having fallen behind in that struggle for notoriety which guided the Affinities' thoughts and actions.

"But best-beloved, you must. It's imperative that you should do so." Her hostess hesitated, then added in a firmer tone, "We cannot afford in these strenuous times to allow our gifted ones to remain silent."

The hint was plain and gave assurance to Anne's suspicions.

"I don't want to start again," she said sullenly, and Lady Rosendale shrugged her shoulders. Really Anne was impossible and if she refused to pipe her proper tune she should be denied the hemp seed of the Affinities' companionship.

"I am much disappointed, for I understood from Martin Sutherland that you were at work on a fresh book of poems."

The name sent a wave of colour over Anne's face.

"He was wrong," she said curtly; "and even if I had been at work, he had no right to gossip about it."

"I trust we are above those things, and I am surprised at your accusing him of such a fault," Lady Rosendale shot a glance at her. This was a new tone concerning Sutherland. Like all the Affinities she dreaded "misunderstandings," which might lead to defection of members and unpleasant revelations to outsiders ever ready to scoff. "It was only this afternoon that he said you were working hard."

Anne caught her breath sharply. "This afternoon?"

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“Yes, he was lunching here, and must still have been here when dear Henry read those adorable sonnets of his. But, now I come to think of it, I never saw him to say good-bye.”

Anne was silent, choking with anger. The drawing rooms had two doors and escape was easy without being seen from the front room in which they sat. Was it possible Martin had fled from her on purpose? Things were indeed at an end if this had occurred, and yet, after all, was not that her desire? Surely she ought to accept it with thankfulness? She rose abruptly, too ruffled to sit still.

“Nor did I see him; he must have left before I came,” she said indifferently as she adjusted her veil before a mirror that hung over the fireplace. Lady Rosendale remarked that Sutherland was very busy at present, and Anne, having put her veil and hat straight, shrugged her shoulders, laughing rather spitefully.

“I suppose he has to justify his existence, by impressing on people that his penny-a-lining is of vast importance.

Lady Rosendale’s suspicions had received confirmation, but as she parted from Anne she hid all annoyance under an effusive manner and a pressing invitation that her friend should return again soon, for she longed to see more of her whilst she was in London. Anne promised to come to tea before long, but when she reached the South Audley Street Post Office she dispatched a telegram to Philip announcing her return home the following day.

Sutherland had indeed witnessed Anne’s arrival that afternoon, and seizing the first opportunity made his

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escape by the door of the back drawing room. He was in no mood to meet her, filled as he was with resentment against her which had curdled to active disgust. When he left Stiffborough he had been amused at her indignation—her refusal to arrange a future meeting, but her sudden change of expression in the hall had led him to believe her anger was merely assumed. Her subsequent silence he had attributed to the coquetry of a past mistress in the art of seduction rather than a genuine wrath at his behaviour, for it seemed impossible to him that a woman of ethics so elastic as Anne's should have encouraged him to court her under the thinnest veil of platonic friendship, unless she intended to take the step further? He had fancied her above toying with the fringe of sin while sheltered under the cloak of matrimony, and she had so readily assimilated his creed of free love, joined so heartily in his mockery of the marriage tie, that he believed her ready for any adventure. He now saw that she belonged to the type of sinning-saint which he abhorred. He suspected her too of a disposition more liable to extract pleasure from the morbid contemplation of an ungratified passion than from its gratification at the cost of the worldly advantages she loved. The realisation that, be a woman never so hardened a rake in outward seeming, she yet remains by training, and inherited instincts, essentially conventional and domestic at heart, was a lesson he found it hard to learn with regard to Anne. He revolted from the half-measures which appealed to her, and hated the feeling that the woman he loved should be capable of a cowardice that smirched her fairness to his critical eyes.

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But when he saw her enter Lady Rosendale's drawing room with the soft flush of excitement on her face, the changing lights dancing in her eyes, he was drawn irresistibly towards her, and mistrusting for once, his power of controlling his actions, he turned and fled. But flight, if it availed for the moment by placing a safe distance between himself and the woman who filled a bigger space in his life than he cared to acknowledge, failed to efface her memory. That passing glimpse had stirred the old unrest within him, the old longing for her presence, and when, a few weeks later his employers offered to send him to America he accepted with alacrity. Absence would effectually restore him to his normal condition, and his spirits were at their gayest as he left the newspaper office, and turning into the Strand ran against Philip Inescourt, who greeted him boisterously, and enchanted at finding in the bustle of the town a sympathetic listener, launched forth in accounts of the final shooting parties at Stiffborough. He spoke of the "flighting" after plover on the marsh, of the flocks of wild geese which had visited the fields in great numbers this year, and Martin listened, as eager to hear as Philip was to recount details of the land they both loved for widely different reasons. As Sutherland heard of things familiar, but wilfully banished from his mind, he forgot the babel of the city streets through which they walked, the rumble of vans and carts, the vibration of motor 'buses, the hooting of taxi-cabs, the crowds of people streaming along the pavements, and his swift imagination conjured up the glowing carpet of samphire, the stretch of golden sand, the patches of drab-coloured "meals" that fringed the dear familiar shore. In his

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ears rang the wail of the North Sea wind, shrill with the cry of the gulls circling beneath the fiery splendour of a December sunset; before his eyes lay the marsh submerged by a spring tide that swirled over the plank bridges and eddied round the upstanding "hassocks" of grass, as the cold, full moon lured the flooding waters to the confines of the arable land. He saw, heard, and smelt the dear delights of the land that held Anne—Anne of the Marshland in all the plenitude of her beauty and charm—Anne, whom he coveted again with the whole force of his turbulent soul.

"Are you sick of Stiffborough and of us?" Inescourt asked with a laugh, "that you never come there?" Sutherland pleaded press of work.

"I wanted to wire you to come down for Christmas, but Anne refused to let me, she said you were going to your own people."

"I have no people—none who count," Martin answered bitterly.

"Then you were in London! By Jove I wish I had known. I'd have made you come and jollificate with us; for we had a top-hole Christmas; a tree for the kids—Eleanor's you know—and snap-dragon, and a treat for the village folk and a heap of jolly things."

"A really old-fashioned Christmas," Sutherland remarked, and wondered how Anne had enjoyed it. He could not picture her taking a prominent part in such amusements, because she lacked that enchanting capacity for fooling which is one of the greatest pleasures in life.

"Anne's been awfully busy looking up the poor people in the parish. She's taken to doing a lot for them, and I'm glad because it gives her heaps to do and

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think about, and they love her for it."

The old cynical smile stole over Sutherland's face.

"Charity is a good pastime for women, as safe a toy for them as a tin sword for a boy. Each fancies he holds a formidable weapon and is perfectly content."

Inescourt looked up with a bewildered expression, then laughed uneasily and murmured, "Quite so, quite so." He felt Sutherland had said something "awfully clever," and wondered whether he would remember it sufficiently well to retail it to his wife. Then Martin mentioned his proposed trip to America.

"By Jove, what a beastly bore for you," Philip exclaimed. "I'm awfully sorry."

To himself absence from England would have been purgatorial; that it should appeal to Martin never crossed his mind. "I hate going abroad; they give you such beastly food, and rotten breakfasts."

"I'm rather glad to be going; it will make a change."

But even as he spoke Sutherland felt that his anticipated pleasure had been tarnished by those vivid memories of Stiffborough which had recalled Anne's image and he continued hastily:

"I shall probably be away for a long time; so will you say good-bye for me to your wife, as I may not find time to write to her. Perhaps when I am home again she will allow me to pay you a visit at Stiffborough."

Philip promised to deliver the messages, and the two men parted.

As Sutherland left Philip he smiled to himself, he was glad, absurdly glad that Anne had held her peace; but the meeting had disturbed him and he found his

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thoughts reverting persistently to the marsh—the marsh that lay near Anne's home. The marsh of which Anne was queen.

On his return to Stiffborough, Philip communicated Martin's news to his wife. She received it with no further comment than a remark that she, too, wished she was outward bound from English shores. But when she found herself alone with the fact of Sutherland's departure, and above all with his message that he would probably not find time to write and bid her farewell, she grew angry. The old longing for him stirred within her. She hungered for any sign he might vouchsafe, and the last line of "*'Stage Love'*" assumed a horrible significance. She even found herself repeating it aloud one day as she stood on the marsh—

“When the play was played out so for one
man’s pleasure,”

and promptly declared him guilty of a gross impertinence. She stamped her foot and with head held high, returned home. If Martin fancied it was he who had wearied of her he was mistaken, she told herself. She wished he would write in order that she might shew him it was she, not he, who had decided that the play was played out so far for one woman's pleasure. He did write a few days later, for the temptation to do so was strong upon him, since his meeting with Inescourt had evoked Anne's image.

But the letter failed to produce the effect Lady Inescourt desired; on the contrary, it deprived her of all chances of retaliation, for it was restrained in tone,

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and only on the final page did he allow himself any reference to his last visit.

“The date of my return to England is uncertain. I am half tempted to start life afresh in a land where I shall be haunted by neither memories nor regrets, for these things mar life for me in England. You are right not to pardon my offence, and I feel the only restitution I can make is to pass out of your existence; to efface, through absence, the memory of my madness at Stiffborough. You and your home with all its associations, its treasured hours, will linger in my memory as a sweet fragrance that will serve perhaps to lessen the bitterness of my banishment from all that made life sweet to me in the old days. I only hope perhaps, in years to come—if I atone in this manner for past wrongdoing—you will extend your forgiveness to me and bear a less harsh memory of one who would gladly have remained your best and truest friend.”

Remorse filled Anne. She fancied herself driving from his country and his work, the man whose sole fault had been a moment of overmastering passion; an unwise embrace. Surely it would be heartless to treat past misdeeds with this grievous punishment? Torn between her feelings for Martin and her loyalty to Philip she hesitated as to the best course to pursue, and for several days the letter lay unanswered in her despatch box, where many others from the same pen were treasured. Finally she wrote and assured him in rather stilted language that she desired no “undue sacrifice” to be made to “the absurd conventions by which English Society considered itself bound.” He and she had long renounced such “foolish shibboleths.” There was no

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reason against their meeting on perfectly friendly terms, without being “disturbed by the recollection of an impulse that had been both wrong and foolish, and which it would be best to bury with the dead things of a dead past.” She wished him a good journey, a pleasant visit, and a speedy return. Thus far all was well; she prepared to sign the letter and stared out of the window at the crocuses quaking under the cold kiss of an easterly wind that swept over the garden and bore on its wings the distant murmur of the sea. But neither the flowers, wind, nor the voice of the troubled waters brought further inspiration, and she signed her name, leaving the letter ready for post on her table.

When evening had blotted out the garden, and the wind had fallen asleep, she picked up the envelope, opened it, re-read its contents, hesitated for a second, pen in hand, then with a sharp movement of impatience she wrote a P.S. : “If you have time or inclination to write sometimes, I shall be here. Stiffborough, as you know, is a dull hole, where any news from the outside world is a boon, so you need not be afraid of boring me by sending me some.”

She did not mention the letter to Philip, though for the rest of the evening she played *bézique* with him; nor did it dawn on her that she had by her actions, that afternoon, paved a fresh little by-path to hell.

CHAPTER VII

“JOURNEY’S END——”

SUMMER had already touched the hand of departing spring before Sutherland reached England again, and the tedium of his absence had been bridged to Anne by letters that were neither occasional nor short. But if from the first he had written fully, she had replied with a stiffness that amused him. In her early letters she had been at considerable pains to impress on him that there must be no further intimacy between them. Later she laid bare her soul for his inspection as in the old days, and when summer brought him home, matters had, on paper at all events, returned to their former footing.

But despite this lapse from the path she had ordained that her feet must follow in future, she had not abated in her tenderness towards her husband. The knowledge of his love softened her towards him and she struggled to see him through the rose-coloured glasses of the past, and peace reigned at Stiffborough. It was not until July had run its course, that Anne’s patience really wore thin, and Philip, meeting Miriam one day in Willingsford, begged her to visit his wife.

“Anne’s a bit off colour lately. I don’t know what’s the matter with her, but perhaps you will find out; women can do those things better than men,” he said, and Miriam drove at once to Stiffborough, where she found Anne in a mood to grumble at everything. More espe-

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cially did she revile the past winter, which seemed a needless plaint as a glorious summer was running its course, but with her ghoul-like need of harrying a dead grievance, she grumbled lustily, while Miriam listened to abuse of East Anglia as a place of residence. It was not until Anne turned and rent Stiffborough itself that Miss Heathcote's patience waned, and Lady Inescourt having termed it a "rotten hole," there was a short pause before her guest said:

"But surely you wouldn't care to travel all your life? To be a wandering Jew with no home?"

"I should prefer it to this. The place reeks of stagnation, and nothing is more horrible to my soul. Every artist is a nomad at heart." The last remark was one of Sutherland's, made long ago, and she used it didactically. "You ought to live here," she continued irritably; "you ought to have married Phil, since you're so fond of the place. You would have made him an infinitely more suitable wife than I have ever done, or ever shall do. You would have enjoyed the place as much as I hate it."

Her listener gazed out of the window.

"I should have been quite happy here, but then East Anglia is my home and I love it; as for marrying Phil, however, we knew one another too well for that. It's only in rare cases that boy and girl friendships ripen into anything warmer, though they are delightful things."

She spoke lightly and the smile was still on her lips, though her heart ached, because Anne's words had filled her with hunger for the "might have been." Then she heard the little clear tinkling laugh that

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always carried a suggestion of cruelty in its sound.

"What about Jack Frazer? That boy and girl friendship ripened pretty well, didn't it? Or do you pretend he doesn't worship the ground you tread on, and gape at you as though you were one of the wonders of existence?"

Anne's eyes gleamed with mischief; for the moment she had forgotten her fretfulness in a desire to engineer this marriage. It would vary the monotony of existence.

"Poor old Jack, he doesn't see a decent white woman from one year's end to another in the jungly part of India where he lives, so that when he comes home he thinks every white thing adorable," Miriam answered evasively. She hated the feeling that Jack's affairs were discussed. But Anne resumed:

"It would do admirably, my dear. You had much better marry him; he's comfortably off, and you would make any man a splendid wife—you're so good and unselfish—so kind and thoughtful. You would be perfectly happy trotting about India in an abominably unbecoming pith helmet, converting the Hindus and all the other heathen; though it passes my comprehension why they shouldn't be allowed to go on doing as their fathers have done for endless generations before them. After all, their religion suits their nature and climate. They don't want our religion, so why should we pester them with it? Personally, I think the French are wise in not taking "le bon Dieu au sérieux."

She loved shocking Miriam, all the more so to-day because she was on edge herself and the desire to pinch somebody or something was fierce within her. She was rewarded for her last remark by seeing her guest flinch.

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"Don't, Anne, it sounds horrid, and you know you don't mean what you say." But the desire to tease was too strong in Lady Inescourt, and spurred her to the old topic of Miriam's marriage.

"You would be a model wife, an immaculate mother, a housewife beyond compare. You would run round with soup and good advice! You would say the right thing about the horrible babies you were called on to admire! My dear Mim, you are wasted, wickedly wasted as a spinster. As Lady Inescourt you would have been adored by the county, and a fruitful vine on the walls of your husband's house. What a pity that I can't resign in your favour—except that I want Phil."

There was nothing but mockery in her voice and Miriam laughed her words aside, saying she had no wish to alter her present condition of existence. Then, anxious to turn Anne's thoughts into a channel less painful to herself, she made some remark on parish questions, whereupon her companion announced a wish to discontinue the mothers' meetings. "It's sheer waste of time and I haven't got it to waste; besides the women don't really care about it, and I don't get a yard further with them, so I see no good in it." The old discontent had returned to her voice and Miriam thought of the despairing appeal made six months ago for something to fill her days with. She thought of the pale, restless creature, who had paced the Marston drawing-room and cried that she must have her days full, full, full, so that there might be no time left for thought! How strange that Anne should change like this! She supposed it was part of that incomprehensible "artistic temperament," to which Anne often referred. What-

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ever the cause it did not make Lady Inescourt easy to deal with, and Miriam was not surprised that Philip had spoken of his wife as being “off colour.”

Miss Heathcote argued for some time in favour of the mothers’ meeting, but Anne was obdurate: “It bores them horribly to dress up in their Sunday best and drag over here to listen to the fearful rubbish Mr. Lyons gives me to read to them. If it was something good it would be different, for one might elevate them; but when I tried Browning they seemed still more bored and sleepy. They are a hopelessly dull, stupid lot.”

The idea of the fishermen’s wives and daughters understanding “The Ring and the Book,” or “Sordello” amused Miriam and laughter choked her speech, but seeing that Anne was not inclined for even the most good-natured banter, she explained the pleasure the women derived from the simple tales and the afternoon’s amusement. But her companion remained firm. The charity phase had played its part, and she was weary of it.

“You love those things, my dear, and I hate them; you enjoy that form of qualification for a seat in Abraham’s bosom; I have no aspirations in that direction,” she said flippantly.

Miriam was perplexed by her mood; then the reference to the “fruitful vine” recurred to her. Here, perchance, lay the cause of her bitterness. It was a subject she had never heard Anne mention, perhaps because she felt it too deeply; so filled with a desire to console she leant forward and laid her hand gently on the other woman’s knee.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that, it sounds so

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hard, so unhappy.” She hesitated for a moment. “You spoke about children as though you envied people who had them, but you may have plenty yet.”

“Heaven forbid! To become a breeding machine is the lowest form of degradation.”

Miriam looked at the flushed face before her. Essentially feminine and gentle herself, this scorn of motherhood repelled her.

“I hate babies,” Anne continued hotly. “No baby ought to be born until it’s two years old, and then it should be put out of sight till it’s done being spotty and horrid.”

“But surely you would like children running about the house; you would like to feel that in years to come your son should succeed to the dear old place. I quite understand your not liking all children, but your own would be so different—they would be Philip’s as well.”

“That’s just it,” she burst out, then checked herself, and resumed in a mocking tone: “No thanks, Mim, no nurseries for me, there wouldn’t be a moment’s peace; it would be impossible to write with a pack of squalling children in the place.” She spoke with her most self-conscious air.

“Perhaps you might find children more interesting than writing.”

There was an unwonted tartness in the retort that surprised Anne.

“Once an artist, always an artist. You can’t eliminate temperament, especially the artistic temperament, which is the highest and most delicate of all.” She paused and smiled condescendingly. “After all, one can’t expect you to understand the joys of art, of

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creation, the thrill of seeing your own ideas clothed in your own language; of knowing that to thousands they will express the things that perhaps have vainly fermented within their own minds, but which they—from lack of power—were incapable of rendering into song. It would be impossible, adequately, to explain such a thing to you, and to those like you who are ignorant of these blessed powers. It would be impossible to induce you to see them in their true light and beauty; to see them as every artist does.”

Contemptuous pity for her companion’s limitations rang in her words. Wounded vanity soothed itself with the salve of her own eloquence, but Miriam was silent, and she could not help a desire to laugh at the nonsense to which Lady Inescourt had given vent. It was Anne who reverted to the ill-starred topic of offspring.

“As for children, which you seem to consider the panacea of all ills, they are a source of disappointment. Like teeth they are a trouble from the moment they come till they go.”

The subject was evidently a bitter one, and since Miriam wished to avoid all causes of friction she kept silent for a moment, and Anne laughed harshly. The longing for children had been as ephemeral as most of her moods and she felt a certain anger at herself for having given way to such “sentimental rubbish.”

“You acknowledge the truth of my argument by your silence,” she said triumphantly. Miriam looked at her; then in pursuance of her own train of thought rather than from any intention to tread on thin ice, she said:

“They are a great safeguard.”

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“Against the extinction of that sacrosanct thing the county family?”

“No, as a protection to many women against committing foolish actions.”

Anne’s figure stiffened from indolent grace to rigidity, so that fear awoke within Miriam as her hostess asked what she meant.

“That children are often influences that keep women straight. Edith Stewart would never, I believe, have left her home if she had been a mother.”

Anne smiled—the little crooked smile—her attitude relaxed; after all it was with another woman that Miriam dealt, a woman for whom she herself had always cherished a great aversion.

“Edith was a fool,” she said curtly. “She made an idiot of herself over a sordid, commonplace intrigue with a married man.”

“I hear she is dying, poor soul.”

“A good solution of the difficulty.”

“But a cruel one at eight-and-twenty.”

Anne shrugged her shoulders. “After all, she’s had her wish, she’s been loved by the one man in all the world for whom she really cared; she’s lived with him for five years. Surely that isn’t bad when you start by making a hash of things and marrying the wrong person.”

“But she has paid a heavy penalty for it; the social ostracism must have been dreadful, and I for one, shall always respect her because she had the courage of her convictions, a rare attribute in men or women. She loved that good-for-nothing man, she sacrificed everything to him, knowing they could never be married. It

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required enormous courage to do such a thing, and not one woman in a thousand would have faced it."

"The game was worth the candle, I suppose," Anne retorted, with an unpleasant laugh; "if you openly break the seventh commandment, you can't sail on the lake of social morality. Edith did it with her eyes open."

"It seems incredible to me that any woman can do it with her eyes open," Miriam said; then after a pause she asked why Anne was so bitter against Edith? "I remember your saying that no woman should expect forgiveness in this world or the next if she deceived such a devoted husband as George Stewart. It struck me as an unduly cruel form of justice to mete out to her."

"All justice is cruel, abominably cruel," Anne retorted fiercely. "However it's a long time since I said that about Edith—those were my salad days when my judgment was green concerning some things. Perhaps one grows more lenient with time." Miriam looked at her quickly.

"Would you condone the sin now?" she asked.

A sudden movement on Anne's part caught a bowl of flowers by her side and flung it with a crash on the floor, scattering the blossoms far and wide. "How clumsy of me," she cried, dropping on her knees and mopping up the water which trickled over the polished oak boards. "Do ring for the servants to clear up this dreadful mess, my handkerchief is soaked through."

Miriam obeyed, and when the footman appeared with the duster Anne chattered lightly of many things, but not of Edith Stewart, or of her own attitude towards moral questions.

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The memory of the scene lingered in Miss Heathcote's memory, affording food for thought, for fear, too, although, as she continued to assure herself, she had no tangible cause to doubt Anne's rectitude, or question her devotion to Philip. In fact the latter trait was aggressively obvious in Lady Inescourt's manner, and she seldom shewed her old impatience with his clumsiness of speech or actions. Outwardly she was an ideal wife. Why then suspect or question?

After that Miriam saw little of Anne for some time, and when next she met Philip he was in excellent spirits, his wife had recovered he said, from her fit of depression and was well and happy. "It's her artistic temperament you know." He had caught the infection of Anne's attitude and screened her behind it willingly. "It makes her awfully sensitive to changes of weather. Little things that wouldn't affect you or me upset her horribly."

Miriam said nothing, after all what was there to say? Philip was content so nobody else had the right to speak, and in truth Anne had regained her former brightness when August commenced. Stiffborough was in the zenith of its loveliness one sunny morning as she leant out of the dining-room window while her husband finished his breakfast. She was singing softly to herself, as he loved to hear her sing, for her voice had a caressing quality when she was happy, so he chumped bacon in time to the air from "Samson and Delilah" that poured from her lips, while she gazed at the garden below her.

"It's good to be alive for the weather alone, on a day like this, isn't it?" she said suddenly over her shoulder.

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“Rippin’,” he answered, and glanced beyond her at the mackerel clouds imposed on the vivid blue of the sky. “Awfully jolly day.”

As he rose to cut a slice of bread at the sideboard, he said:

“Wonder what price the pigs will fetch, they ought to bring in a good sum; pigs are up.”

Anne hunched herself impatiently against the lintel of the window frame. Pigs were far from her mind; she resented the intrusion of so unsavoury an element on the perfection of the day and her own sentimental mood. “Pigs! What horrid dirty things to think of on a morning like this,” she said.

“They’re awfully jolly little brutes. Don’t you remember old Sal’s last litter but one? You rather liked them; especially the little chap, the runt.”

“In their proper places, perhaps,” she retorted, and he looked up.

“Isn’t the market their proper place?”

“Yes, not the breakfast table when the day is all blue and gold, when ‘breath seems only given for praise’ and the whole world is one dear, beautiful dream of delight.”

“I see.”

It was an answer he often gave her, and she wondered fretfully, why on earth he didn’t “see” sooner, instead of waiting till his errors were pointed out to him and she had lost her temper, first with him and secondly with herself for her lack of control.

“I’m a bad hand at understanding the fitness of topics,” he remarked, as he poured himself out another cup of tea. She was in a captious mood and he was

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surprised, for she seldom gave way to them of late.

"It doesn't matter, Phil," she said, repenting her tartness. "I was at fault to snap, but the weather has got into my head and all other things seem so harsh, so commonplace on a morning like this when one's soul is feasting on the loveliness of the world. Oh, Phil, it's a dear, delicious, heavenly world and I am at peace with all mankind—even with pigs," she said gaily.

Her mind had flown to things far from Philip or pigs, flown to pleasures in which he would bear no part, for Martin was coming this afternoon and the weather had served to crown the gladness within her.

He at all events would understand her mood; there lay the difference between the two men. She sighed. The need of sympathetic comprehension gnawed at her heart, though a sense of shame filled her at the knowledge that she sought it from Martin rather than Philip, who strove earnestly and unsuccessfully to give it her.

He had risen from the table and approached her.

"What a toppin' day, look at those cotton-woolly clouds aren't they jolly? Shan't I have a top-hole drive to Willingsford?"

"You could drive the whole way to Yorbury if you would get a car," she retorted. It was a vexed question, for they were unable to afford a motor as well as horses, and Philip refused to dismiss the old coachman in the evening of his life.

"It would be jolly; but it's no good wishing the impossible. When Jeffreys dies you shall have a car darling, and by then, probably, they will be cheaper both to buy and keep up."

"I wish Jeffreys would hurry off into another

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world." She laughed rather petulantly for she had no patience with obsolete things; and Jeffreys, the old-fashioned carriages and well-fed horses, belonged to that category.

"Poor old chap, he's game for a long time yet," Philip said, then added regretfully, "I wish I was tremendously rich, because you would so love to spend money."

"Yes, like water. Paupers are always built that way, and rich people are like a freezing chamber—they store up the water of wealth in frozen bulk and never really enjoy it; that's such a dull way of existing to my mind."

"But it's the way they get rich, I suppose; because they store it up. I remember a rich chap once said to me: 'Some people collect pictures and books, old furniture and things like that, others collect money—I do.' It's all part of the same collecting habit."

"Human caddises building up by their environment from the things which appeal to them most; we're all like that in some respect," she replied with a laugh, and turning from the window glanced at the clock. "You ought to be starting unless you mean to miss the train." She longed to see him go, for there were many things she wanted to think about and do before Martin came.

"Don't forget to order the brougham for Sutherland?" Inescourt remarked as Anne pulled his tie straight and told him he was incorrigibly untidy. He took her hands in his and kissed them, "I try to please you, darling," he said—she laughed.

"I know you do," she said gently; "you are an angel, Phil."

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With a tender smile, he told her not to talk rot—then reminded her again about ordering the brougham. She smiled. Was she likely to forget? After a pause he added:

“It’s quite a long time since Sutherland came—six months I should think.”

She turned aside and pressed herself against the window ledge once more, her arms crossed on it, her eyes looking down at the garden. What a fool Philip was to forget. And yet she was glad it should be so; too keen a memory, too lively an imagination on his part would hardly prove convenient.

“He hasn’t been here for nearly ten months,” she replied slowly.

“By Jove, so it is! How time flies. I thought he was here in the spring; I remember now it was in the autumn when the wild geese had come, that he went to America. What an awful lot he will have to talk about, won’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what he thought of it all. I should like to see the cattle market in Chicago; they say it’s stunning.”

“Probably—to the animals.”

Her sarcasm fell flat as it often did, though afterwards he was apt to recall things she had said, and to feel the sharpness of their sting to the full. At present his mind was filled with the question of Martin’s train—and he expressed his regret at being unable to greet his arrival. “However, you will look after him all right and naturally he prefers talking to you.”

She made no reply but gazed at a flaunting row of

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sunflowers that formed a background to the herbaceous border. Her face flushed a little. Philip's humility was pathetically disturbing, it stirred her conscience unpleasantly, and she heaved a sigh of relief when the dog cart vanished down the drive as her husband leant back to call out a parting request that Jess, the spaniel, should be taken for a walk.

It was late in the afternoon that she remembered Philip's wish, and calling the dog, wandered down to the stream, bordered on the garden side by flaming tritomas and clumps of pampas grass reflected in the rippling water, while the further bank was fragrant with the featheriness of meadow-sweet rising above a gay band of forget-me-nots.

Anne had purposely avoided dwelling on the prospect of Martin's advent—an advent so unduly delayed, that she had been angry with him, suspecting him of disinclination to visit Stiffborough. As a matter of fact each had waited on the action of the other, and Sutherland, being the stronger, had won. He was determined that Anne should be responsible for the next step, and had waited with consummate patience till, goaded to desperation at his apparent indifference, she wrote and asked him to name his own time for a visit. Even then he made no haste, and using work as an excuse, skilfully delayed coming till this golden and azure day.

As Anne walked by the stream she thought of the approaching meeting. How he would greet her after their long separation? Would his absence have changed him? Would man's proverbial fickleness to the old love prove itself? Would his admiration for her have changed? Would he no longer care for her companion-

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ship? The thought was intolerable—and yet, after all, was it not better she should find him changed since he was coming, in a manner, on a new footing which she had ordained as suitable to the exigencies of the situation? Formerly he had been an intimate, now he was to be an acquaintance, a friend, nothing more. He had always been a friend, in her eyes at all events—nothing more. The two words formed the amen to her thoughts. Since she wished him to remain a friend he must accept her rulings. No doubt he would, for, of course, he had learnt his lesson. Foolish people might suggest danger in such a friendship; that was silly. She, at all events, was capable of taking care of herself, and was it likely that Sutherland, man of the world as he was, should be less so? She paused beside a group of tritomas. With a pensive smile she dropped a pebble in the water and watched it sink in the emerald weeds that waved in the current of the stream. She had once begun a poem on those weeds—

“Rippling water, rippling weed,”

the first line had run, but she had got no further for lack of a rhyme to weed, she recalled it now and added:

“That the pebble’s fall impede.”

Then her mind reverted to Martin.

After all if she banished every man to whom her beauty and charm appealed, she would find life strangely devoid of entertainment. Of course she only admired Sutherland’s intellect, valued his liking for herself, whilst his appreciation of her beauty was pleasant, that was all—nothing more. How could there be anything

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more when she was so fond of Philip? Poor, dear soul! A hint of condescending pity in the thought twitted her lips with the crooked smile. She constantly referred to him as “poor, dear soul” in her own mind.

The more serious side of her relations with Martin being disposed of with the “nothing more” doxology, she staged the scene of their meeting. Setting played an important part in all her schemes, and to-day she wished to appear in her most pleasing aspect. The drawing room was banal; the garden would give her a sense of standing too far from her background, of losing the good effect she wished to create, so she decided to greet him on the doorstep. He would find her in the spot where they had parted, against the glossy green of the ivy and the clusters of creamy roses flung over the grey of the rubble-built walls; a background which would throw into relief her slight figure in its summer dress. Satisfied with this solution of the question, she returned to the house with the intention of reading, but some demon of unrest filled her, and she laid her book aside impatiently as a chair, pushed out of place, caught her eye. She rose and put it straight with a malediction on the iniquities of housemaids; then it struck her that a vase of long stemmed red roses was ineffective against the Spanish embroidery which hung over a screen. The flowers migrated to another table, and as she deposited them, her eyes fell on her own reflection in a mirror, and she stood before it patting her hair on one side, pulling it looser on the other; till the sound of wheels on the gravel startled her. The train must have been punctual beyond its wont, and she flew out of the room, her heart beating, her cheeks pale with the emotion within

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her; but as she reached the hall she was met by the footman ushering in Mrs. Chester. Retreat was impossible, equally was it impossible to say she was not at home, and she stood, arrested in her swift advance, in an attitude suggestive of a gracefully posed figure on a Grecian vase.

Mrs. Chester's eagle eye rested on her with surprise. "How on earth is it that you are in at this time," the old lady remarked as she held out her hand. It was scarcely a usual form of greeting and plainly betrayed her hope that Lady Inescourt would have been out.

"Oh, I don't know—it was so hot early, and—and I didn't want to go out," Anne stammered.

She had been caught at a disadvantage and the revulsion in her feelings when, instead of meeting Martin she encountered Mrs. Chester, had disconcerted her. She looked at her guest with the guilty air of a child caught in some misdeed. The expression was not lost on the newcomer as she followed her hostess into the drawing room. What, she wondered, had been the object of Anne's swift advance? She was determined to fathom the mystery, and after the exchange of a few platitudes, announced her wish to see the garden. Anne remarked sulkily that there was nothing in the place worth seeing, but was forced to follow her on to the lawn. At any moment Martin might arrive, her plan of meeting him on the doorstep would be frustrated, and at all events the episode must lose its romantic and dramatic effect under the keen eyes of the M.F.H.'s inquisitive wife. It was maddening. Meanwhile Mrs. Chester was examining every plant with the connoisseur's critical eye. She plunged into a dissertation on thrip, mealy bug, and all the ills—how innumerable they seemed to Anne—to

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which floral flesh was heir. Lady Inescourt listened glumly. Flowers were an ornament to a room, a necessity in a garden, an adjunct to her dress; she paid a man high wages to keep her supplied with them, but that their diseases were of interest she failed to understand, and it left her cold to hear that Mrs. Chester's gooseberries were badly mildewed, her roses less fine than last summer; and as for the question of its proving a good year to ripen seeds she was totally indifferent. She marked a catalogue of Sutton's and Philip paid the bill. What did it matter whether the Stiffborough seeds ripened or not?

Without saying these things she plainly gave her visitor to understand her feelings on the subject, and the old lady only waxed more eloquent; enlarging on the saving of expense entailed by keeping seeds. In short she read her hostess a lecture on garden economies, to which Anne, straining her ears for the sound of Martin's arrival, paid small heed. Mrs. Chester was still in the midst of her dissertation when the gravel crunched under the tread of Jeffrey's fat horses and she paused, her head turned inquisitively towards the direction of the sound.

"More visitors? You are gay this afternoon," she said.

Anne was silent for a second, then she said stiffly, "I am expecting Mr. Sutherland by the 4.30 train."

A long drawn "Ah" proceeded from the M.F.H.'s wife. Her beady eyes glued themselves on her hostess's face. The monosyllable conveyed a world of comprehension, of which Anne was disagreeably aware as she continued hastily: "He has been in America for over four

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months, and since this is his first visit, he is sure to have much to tell of it all."

"Most interesting," Mrs. Chester remarked, and her lips closed as she watched the colour flame into her companion's face when Sutherland emerged, in the servant's wake, through the garden door.

In a moment he had outstripped the footman and advanced, hat in hand to his hostess.

"It is good of you to let me come. I hear Philip is at Yorbury buying or selling pigs; what a zealous farmer he is."

Anne was dumb. The blood had rushed to her face then left it pale again as she introduced Mrs. Chester.

"But we have met before," Martin said quickly, his voice low and pleasant, his narrow eyes smiling at the old lady.

"Perhaps so," she remarked frigidly.

"Yes, long ago, much too long, Lady Inescourt, for my liking," he added turning to Anne. "But duty called me away from the delights of England, home and beauty, and I find all three vastly agreeable now that I am back in their midst."

"You have been in America?" Mrs. Chester questioned. He bowed assent.

"Yes, for several months."

"What sort of country is it?"

He remarked that since it was composed of many countries he wondered to which she particularly referred.

"America in general, Americans in general. Personally those I have come across are vulgar people who live in a rush and think money can purchase everything.

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"In which they aren't far wrong. Everybody and everything has its price."

Mrs. Chester retorted that she did not share his opinions, for she at all events knew of people whom no price would tempt, though she understood this no longer held good in London society.

Anne listened in silence, thankful for the screen that the conversation afforded, because it enabled her to recover her equanimity and watch the newcomer. Then Mrs. Chester plunged into a discourse on the ways and customs of "society" while Sutherland listened to the flow of her oratory, deriving considerable amusement from the movements of Anne's restless fingers as they pulled a rose to pieces. He was glad there should be a witness to his return at Stiffborough, for he had suspected Lady Inescourt of attempting some scenic or sentimental effect, such as she loved and he detested; but before Mrs. Chester this had been impossible.

Having babbled of many things, the old lady added at last in her most derisive tone that fashion was absurd; its changes so persistent that in the country one could not keep pace with London's doings. "I hear Charity, or Socialism, are the smart things, with a dash of Woman's Suffrage," she said.

He acquiesced. "The first is an excellent sop to the Cerberus of some women's uneasy consciences, the others lend excitement to existence, especially Socialism, because it's like playing with matches in a powder magazine."

Mrs. Chester's next remarks on feminine faddists left little to be desired in pungency. "What are they driving at? What do they want?" she added after a long tirade.

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"Advertisement, which is the chief aim and object of most so-called reformers. Notoriety is the one abiding thing, nowadays. Notoriety, reputable if possible, disreputable if the other is impossible. As for the Socialist section of society they spend their time evolving theories in which the vinegar of socialistic ideas is to be sweetened with the oil of their own aristocracy that will float, they imagine, on the surface."

Mrs. Chester looked at him dubiously. She never liked this "impossible newspaper man" whose voice by its soft tones seemed to caress that which his words rent to pieces. Anne laughed as she stole a glance at him. How good it was to see him again, to hear his beguiling voice! How refreshing after a prolonged course of Philip's boisterous good humour and unfailing habit of seeing the best in his fellows!

Then she heard Mrs. Chester remark acidly:

"In my young days husbands were husbands, not nannies afraid of asserting their authority and managing, or even whipping their wives into decency. There was none of this notoriety hunting, this advertising through philanthropy and Socialism. The women of my generation were mothers of children, house-wives, not mountebanks and laughing stocks."

Sutherland shrugged his shoulders with a deprecatory movement.

"'Autre temps autres moeurs:' What can you expect; it is part of woman's evolution from the prehistoric era of sampler-sewing; she is developing her mental faculties at the expense of her womanliness; and not being blessed with judgment she is apt to exceed in some directions. The pendulum will swing back again

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in another generation, I daresay."

Mrs. Chester shot him an inimical look. The words "evolution" and "development" were noxious to her, and she remarked, stiffly, that all she asked of her sex was simplicity and naturalness. A gleam of malice lit Sutherland's eyes.

"The impossible," he retorted, "Women--the best of them--are for ever attudinising before themselves and their fellows; besides life would be tame if one could calculate on a woman's next move. It's the mutability of your sex that forms its charm. Mutability, instability, chameleon-like changes; those are the attributes that make woman so delightful to man."

"I have no use for turncoats," Mrs. Chester sniffed haughtily as she rose to depart.

"Ah, that is unkind. One always uses euphemisms in speaking of women. It's essential."

"Plain English is good enough for me," she retorted, her dislike of the man conquering her civility, which had been strained to its utmost during the last half hour. But Sutherland, unabashed by her manner, insisted on escorting her to the door.

When he returned he found Anne leaning back in a wicker chair, her face sullen, her mouth set in peevish lines. She was annoyed with him, with circumstances, with Mrs. Chester; but her anger burnt the most hotly against the man, for she felt he had been flippant in his greeting, and had shewn no sign of real pleasure in seeing her again.

"What a woman," she explained petulantly, as he reached her. "I'm exhausted."

He looked at her with an indulgent smile.

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"I found her quite refreshing, so aggressively conservative and narrow. After all there really is a great deal of fun to be extracted out of the local Mrs. Grundys."

Anne shook herself fretfully. "She is exactly like 'Agamemnon' when he's moulting," she said, indicating with a movement of her head the old grey parrot whose cage hung from the tree. Sutherland laughed, and looked at the bird, who returned his gaze with eyes as malignantly bright as Mrs. Chester's.

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER PAIR ON THE MARSH

MARTIN'S presence set the yeast of Anne's old discontent fermenting within her. She was ill at ease, frightened at herself and Sutherland, angry with Philip for shewing so disadvantageously beside their guest, and with Martin because he had changed in a manner she disliked.

He took nothing for granted now, as he had done formerly ; he showed her deference where in old days he had been familiar ; he was courteous, with the smile and hollow manner of acquaintanceship. He was the unfamiliar guest, not the intimate friend. And if for a while these things pleased her—for it was seemly he should feel himself a transgressor—she soon wearied of them. She had imagined herself mistress of the situation, dictator of his conduct, and for four and twenty hours her eyes shone, her voice rang with an almost blatant note of victory.

But on the second day of his visit these things palled. He had refused to spend the morning with her, and shutting himself up in the library made press of work his excuse. This was trying, for she had arranged that Philip should be employed at Yorbury while she and Sutherland spent the day on a corner of the marsh some miles further along the coast. It was a spot which held many pleasant memories for Anne and she longed to re-visit it. But Sutherland had no intention of de-

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parting from his well-arranged scheme. He would not expose himself to a second rebuff, and if she regretted this deference it was for her to say so.

The third morning of his stay he retreated again to the smoking room till the luncheon gong sounded, and despite the fact that Anne found occasion to pass frequently beneath the window in which he sat, and tried to lure him from his work, he gave no sign of relenting. All that she saw was a sleek head bent over the writing table and smoke rising from the pipe between his lips. Apparently he was oblivious of her presence. Had she seen him closely she would have found a gleam of malice in his eyes, a twitching of his mouth round the stem of the pipe. He understood her quite well. After luncheon he announced himself free to "play," and then she grew still more conscious of the barrier between them, for, the moment topics incapable of being lightly skimmed presented themselves, he turned the conversation till the cockleshell of talk sailed safely and easily over shallow waters.

She resented his attitude, since with the mutability of her sex, she longed to pick up the old threads precisely where she had chosen to drop them, yet dared not tell him so. Once or twice, prompted by a devilish impulse to test his power over her, he shewed her trifling signs of tenderness at which she clutched with the desperation of a drowning man clutching at straws; but even as the drowning man finds the straws whirled away, so did she find these signs of affection swept from her by the rapid current of events.

At the end of the third day Sutherland proposed a walk to the sea. Besides his love of the marsh, it

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pleased him to see Anne—Anne of the Marshland as he dubbed her—surrounded by its half sad, half radiant beauties, and as the hot afternoon drew to a close the lure of the sea called him.

The tide was low when they reached the foot of the ragged hedge, wreathed with honeysuckle and prisoned by the clinging fingers of feathery clematis in full bloom. Beyond the marsh and stretch of golden fore-shore, the sea faded in a pale blue horizon, and patches of statice and thrift splashed the scene. Sutherland watched the purple shadows appreciatively as they flecked the sea, the clouds that glided overhead, the flight of gulls as they skimmed the blue of the tide-pools, oyster-catchers paddling in the shallow waters of the ripple-washed shore; the soft blurring of colours, the tender hues of sky and sea, and all the things that beautify this place, enchanting him, stirring the poetical side of his soul, and he forgot even the woman by his side as he crumpled a piece of drift-wood in his fingers. She saw herself swept aside till, impatient at his abstraction, she said sharply:

“A penny for your thoughts.”

He started and answered. “I hardly know, they were so inconsequent, so elusive; I was only watching the lights and shadows, the blending of colours on the marsh and wishing one could reproduce them by pen or brush. But no human power can convey their marvellous, intangible charm.”

The artist’s sigh of delight at beautiful surroundings, clouded by the longing for a wider range of expression escaped him; and as she glanced at him she saw that his eyes had lost their furtiveness while they rested

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on the scene he loved. A moment later he broke into words, eager to paint for her that which his fancy beheld, and the past which stood forth vividly to him.

As he stood here with the hedge between, and the flat surface of the marsh with its ribbon of dazzling sea beyond, he saw with the dreamer's eye a high-prowed Danish ship advancing slowly up the creek, towed by half-clad men, whose honey-coloured hair floated on their shoulders, whose beards streamed in the breeze which rippled the placid surface of the ocean. He heard the scream of the taut ropes, the grunts of the men labouring with every nerve and sinew strained to its utmost. Up the creek they came silently, the ship scarcely seeming to move over the waters that murmured against her sides, till the haven had been reached, and the men furled the red brown sails, leaving her masts stark and bare against the glowing August sunset. He saw the rope slacken and drop from their aching hands into the water; heard the splash of the clumsy, primitive anchor as it sank in the muddy bottom of the pool, round whose edges the men stood waist-deep in the water, as the sea birds, disturbed by their advent, wheeled in restless flocks, now white and sharply defined, now lost to sight against the soft background of sky and sea. Plainly he heard the foreign language that yet seemed familiar to him; the frightened plaining of the birds as the sailors wandered across the marsh in search of game, or banded together, raided the villages for supplies, while others set off inland for the Danish camp, planted on a hillock surrounded by earth fortifications and by the steep escarpments that art, improving on nature, had created for its protection.

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There had been many such episodes, and raids in the past, and to-night Sutherland saw himself a member of that landing party. He could have found his way blindfold over the decks of the weather-beaten ship, which he had steered and sailed in fair weather and foul, and helped to haul up some such creek as this, many times had he warped her to the stakes, whose slimy surface slipped beneath his hands, and left her, with sails furled like some huge bird of prey resting with closed pinions against the flat loveliness of the marsh.

He spoke of these things, forgetting her presence, in dream reminiscences of that past life in which he had played a part. He spoke of voyages across the North Sea; of storm-wracked nights, days of danger and fear; of fights on land and sea, of the dear delights of a life, free from all trammels, the only fit life as he said for a man, with its disregard of social bonds, its freedom from those galling pauses before the moral signposts placed by laws and principles along the roadway of existence.

Then he paused and became conscious again of Anne, her face sullen, her mouth set in hard lines of discontent. He had turned to her for comprehension, for sympathy, his face aglow with excitement. He found sullenness.

“It’s so familiar, that I must have been a pirate once, like the clerk in Kipling’s story,” he cried, but Anne made no reply; she lacked his power to visualise or dream dreams. The very familiarity of the marsh slew her fancies before they were born. He saw her mood and asked what troubled her.

“Nothing,” she said, curtly, then pulling a spray of honeysuckle towards her she broke it impatiently and

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smelt the flower as though absorbed in its fragrance, while the old cynical smile crossed his face. He saw that her pride was hurt, her vanity smarting under his indifference to her presence.

“Something has vexed you; is it anything I have said or done?”

She twisted the blossom in her fingers before replying abruptly, “I was thinking you had changed.”

“Have I? I’m sorry.”

If her surly face had exorcised his dreams, it appealed to him by its stormy beauty. Strong emotions always attracted him

“Yes, you’ve changed a great deal,” she continued, her eyes fixed on the distant scene.

“For better or worse?”

“I don’t know.” It was a lie; and yet it was best to lie since they were to be friends—nothing more. A retarded memory of her walk by the trout stream on the day of his arrival swept over her. Yes, he was to be a friend—nothing more, she inwardly reiterated; then qualified it by the argument that she had not desired a friend entrenched behind a series of fortifications against which she battered herself in vain. It was time they should arrive at a fresh understanding, and at this moment especially, when the environment of the marsh filled his soul to overflowing with gentle fancies and emotions.

He repeated his question: “How have I changed? In what way have I trespassed on the woman’s prerogative?”

A smile twisted the corners of his lips. He had anticipated such a scene as this, had perhaps striven to

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engineer it by his tactics, since he was determined that any advance should emanate from her.

"It's hard to explain," she began, hesitatingly. "It's nothing tangible, only your manner; you keep me at arm's length, you don't let me get near the real 'you.' You have become a stranger to me, and you have forgotten—forgotten so many things," she added reproachfully.

"Things it was wiser to forget—or to try and forget. Wiser for both of us—perhaps." His gaze swept the sea, but he was aware that the woman beside him had blushed fiercely.

"Yes, yes, of course," she broke in hastily, the colour still flaming in her cheeks. "I mean that we seem to have drifted apart in our ideas of things and people, in our interests, and matters of that kind."

He turned and looked at her. It was an essentially feminine desire to play with danger! His voice was tinged with cynical amusement. "I thought I was following your wishes, obeying your very clearly expressed orders. Could I do more?"

An impatient movement escaped her as she led the way towards the plank bridge that spanned the nearest creek.

"There's a difference between friendship and—silliness." She had commenced her sentence without foreseeing its termination, and the lameness of its conclusion galled her pride. Anger filled her against herself, against Martin, against the plank on which at that moment she slipped so that he caught her arm with one hand.

"You haven't hurt yourself?" he asked anxiously. She shook her head. 127

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"I slipped on a stupid piece of seaweed," she answered pettishly, as they reached the spongy surface of the marsh.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, falling into step beside her. "How do you want me to act? I read your letters most carefully; I understood that you wished me to treat you differently. I've done my best." He hesitated, then in a lower tone: "I have always wished for an opportunity to tell you how deeply I regretted that—that evening in the hall. I must have been mad to say what I did. I really think I was mad with the sight of your beauty. Can't you understand it? Can't you see how it came about; you were beautiful that night in the ingle nook when I watched you in the flickering light of the fire, saw your eyes gleam and cloud as thoughts flitted through your mind, saw the changing expression of your face—the smile—the little air of vexation—then I lost my head like a fool. It was a temptation which an anchorite would not have been proof against had he felt for a woman as I felt for you—then."

They had paused beside a pool of water alive with darting shrimps, and Anne's heart beat tumultuously as her eye followed the swift movements of the creatures in their miniature ocean. She stirred the ribbed sand with the end of her sunshade till the water became clouded and hid the shrimps from view. Martin's speech had been made throughout in the past tense, his emphatic pause before the closing word stung her. "Then" had a sound of finality intensely wounding to her vanity.

"I was ashamed of myself the next moment," he continued, "and I determined that nothing of the kind

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should ever recur. You may trust me absolutely now —Lady Inescourt, I shall never transgress again.” He paused, and thrusting his hands into his pockets, added, “One doesn’t easily forget such a folly or such a well-deserved rebuke, but it’s difficult to act as though nothing had happened on the occasion of our last meeting.”

She turned to him, and with an impulsive movement laid her hand on his arm. “Ah, yes, I know, I know. But don’t make me feel as though I was running up against a wall when we are together. Don’t shut me out of your life so completely as you do now.”

“Walls are safe things, unresponsive, immovable.” He spoke without emotion, his voice hard, though the woman tempted him. But he knew he had only to wait, and the fruit would ripen—it was ripening already!

“I hate that wall,” she said softly. “Don’t let it stand between us too much, for I want your friendship —Martin—it means so much to me. Let things be as they were in the old days before—before that evening.” Her voice sank as she turned to him, and her eyes filled with tears. He smiled as his gaze searched her face closely, then withdrew itself as though fearful of causing her annoyance.

“By all means, we will let the dead past bury its dead and remain friends—friends of the warmest, closest and truest,” he said as she looked up and their eyes met. But she could read nothing in his, for they were the shutters, rather than the windows, of his soul at that moment.

As they resumed their walk towards the foreshore the talk drifted to less intimate matters, but she was discontented, answered at random or fell into long spells

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of preoccupied silence, which he saw and rejoiced at—the fruit was ripening swiftly, the harvest would be abundant as even he desired! Finally, she suggested retracing their steps, and they turned from the sea, across the stubble fields bathed in the golden glow of sunset, while the shadows lay soft and long between the shocks of yellow corn. Hares darted across the open, pausing with ears laid back to hearken lest danger threatened from the man and woman walking leisurely along the narrow pathway; partridges cheeped, the birds in the hedgerows poured forth a final song before the gold and crimson of day's declining splendour faded in the greyness of approaching night, and the cool of the evening drew forth the fragrance of the flowers. But Anne was blind to these things. The peace of the evening was spoilt for her, its beauty dimmed, and neither the call of the birds, the scent of the flowers, nor the fleet grace of the hares affected her. A feeling of resentment against Martin burnt within her like a smouldering fire, whence bright flames of alarm would spring—alarm that she had failed in her attempt to break down the barrier, and in so doing, had lost her dignity, abjured her intended reserve. She thought of these matters now that it was too late, blaming the man's coldness, not her own folly. Above all the word "then" used in connection with his feelings for her, rankled in her mind and life had lost its savour, the day its radiance, as they walked homewards.

The light had faded by the time they entered the hall, and Anne flung her hat on the settle in the ingle nook with a petulant movement that brought a smile to Sutherland's lips. The settle recalled vividly the scene

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of their last interview here, when the autumn gale raged outside and the logs burning on the hearth had illumined her face. Then it had worn a look of fear; now it was merely cross, and yet it attracted him, and he wondered why she dominated him when there were many women infinitely fairer, infinitely more brilliant, who left him unmoved?

"It's cold," she said, with a shiver, "I think I shall light the fire, for this horrible hole is always cheerless in the evenings."

Kneeling down she struck match and held it to the paper lying under the logs that filled the hearth, and as the flames shot up and lit the hall they disclosed an orange envelope lying on a table.

"A telegram; who is it for?" she asked. He crossed the room and found it was addressed to himself. Anne still knelt over the fire her back towards him, when a choked exclamation startled her and she turned her head quickly to see Sutherland standing in the centre of the hall, the telegram in his hand.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

For a second he was deaf to her question, because his thoughts had travelled with startling abruptness down the forgotten by-ways of the past and he saw not Anne, but another woman, a woman different to her in all ways, yet one who had pleased him formerly, even as Anne did now. It needed a repetition of her words to reach him, then he answered hoarsely:

"I must go—go at once."

She had never heard him speak in that tone; she had never seen his face so drawn and haggard. The telegram rustled in his grasp and as she sat back on

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her heels the fear in his face conveyed itself to hers; she looked at him fixedly as she answered:

"You can't go to-night, it's too late; the last train has left."

"To-morrow then—first train to-morrow," he said, still shunning her eyes. It did not strike her at the moment, but afterwards she remembered avoidance, a look of fear, a determination not to meet her gaze. She continued looking at him as she sat hunched up on the hearth with the long brass bellows in her hand.

"What is it?" she asked, "Anything wrong at the office?"

He shook his head, turned impatiently on his heel for a moment, then, controlling himself with an effort, steadied his voice.

"No—my—sister—is suddenly taken ill."

She murmured a vague sentiment of condolence, she had no knowledge of his relations and could not pretend to a vast amount of sympathy. Then he handed her the telegram, which ran:

"Come immediately, Mrs. Grubb attempted suicide last night. Condition grave. Boyd."

CHAPTER IX

THE REAL MAN

THE room was dirty and sparsely furnished with three upright chairs covered in faded red rep, an armchair, and a horsehair sofa deficient of a leg, the last named flanked by a walnut chiffonier on which a red cut-glass decanter nested in a pink and green wool-work mat. A clumsy round table covered with a jute cloth occupied the centre of the apartment, the walls were afflicted with an eruption of denunciatory texts, of ornaments there were none, except a sham green marble clock on the mantelpiece, standing between two unmatched white china candlesticks. The August sun, streaming through the half-open window, accentuated the poverty-stricken aspect of the place, and aggressively marked the contrast it afforded to Sutherland's well-dressed figure as he stood on the patch-work hearth-rug, facing a squarely-built man of sixty, whose bushy eyebrows, meeting on the bridge of his nose and over-hanging his eyeglasses recalled a badly thatched roof surmounting a couple of dormer windows.

"So you consider it hopeless."

Sutherland's words came after a prolonged silence, during which he had digested his companion's statement.

"Quite." The doctor paused, then added, "Of course in mental cases there is a greater element of uncertainty than in others, since we understand the

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brain but superficially at present. Still, after a pretty wide experience, I should say your wife's case is hopeless."

He removed the gold-rimmed glasses from his nose, and passed his hand over his eyes with an air of weariness. He had spent a trying twenty-four hours battling with his patient.

"Yes, quite hopeless," he repeated. "Of course, there will probably be sane intervals; so sane, indeed, that one will be led to question whether she is mad."

He swung his glasses between the finger and thumb of his right hand, twirling the cord from which they hung till they spun with bewildering rapidity and held Sutherland's gaze fascinated. There was mistrust, even aversion in the doctor's expression as he watched the younger man.

"Of course you had better call in a specialist to support my view of Mrs. Grubb's condition." Again he paused as though expecting a reply. None being forthcoming, however, he added stiffly, "I'm sorry for you."

The insincerity of the speech was so palpable that a smile crossed Martin's lips, and he looked up with one of his furtive glances.

"Or rather for her, since you evidently consider me responsible for the present condition of affairs."

"Mrs. Grubb must be removed without delay. You can't keep a maniac in a lodging-house, besides it's dangerous to let the poor thing be at large in her present condition, unless you wish her to put an end to herself."

He ignored Sutherland's speech, which struck him

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as a futile attempt at palliating unpardonable conduct, so he pursued the topic uppermost in his mind and Martin winced. The final words coincided with an unspoken regret at his bondage, a fierce hatred of the incubus upstairs. Like all men capable of mean actions, he hated being suspected of mean thoughts and therefore resented Boyd's remark.

The doctor's eyebrows gathered themselves in a straight line as he scrutinised his companion. He had known nothing of "Martin Grubb" until a couple of hours ago, in response to the urgent telegram this immaculately attired individual had appeared. Ignorant concerning either Sutherland or the origin of the tragedy upon which he had stumbled, the older man was both repelled and attracted by the stranger's personality. Having lived and toiled in mean streets and alleys, ministering to the destitute and to that even more tragic class which, above begging, is yet for ever hovering on the verge of destitution, he had developed socialistic ideas, and his view of Sutherland was coloured by scorn for a society to which suffering and want were but vicariously known evils, for to this class he had instinctively relegated him, because his clothes, his well groomed appearance and scrupulous cleanliness, testified to surroundings foreign to the rep chairs, horsehair sofa, and patch-work hearthrug.

The doctor's face hardened as he thought of the woman upstairs, strapped to the iron bedstead that quivered under her struggles. He surmised the old story of seduction, followed by desertion when the novelty had worn off, and the indignation of the clean-living man was kindled within him till he was tempted

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to upbraid this affluent individual who had allowed the woman to drag out a miserable existence in a dirty by-street whilst he probably lived on the fat of the land. But closer observation revealed lines on the thin, intelligent face, a haggard misery about the mouth that softened his animosity. Such a man could hardly have found companionship in the maniac upstairs; perhaps he too had paid the penalty of his actions? Boyd knew by bitter experience the torment of incongruous natures, and he softened towards Martin. Had he not seen Mrs. Grubb working amongst the poor? Watched her standing on the borderland of insanity, and realised the primitive condition of her intellect? What had she ever had in common with this man, with his air of refinement, his unmistakable evidences of mental vigour and strenuous vitality? Where and how had their minds met? He swung his glasses, contemplated Sutherland, and wondered at the strangeness of the episode, until a wild outburst of laughter echoed through the house, followed by a woman's voice singing with droning monotony:

“Oh, what the joy and the glory must be,
Of those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see.
Crown for the valiant, for weary ones rest;
God shall be all and in all ever blest.”

Sutherland shrank. “Horrible!” he muttered under his breath, and turned sharply to the older man. “What must I do to have her shut up? Or can you do it for me?” His sole desire was to escape from his surroundings, from the nightmare in whose toils he found himself.

The doctor explained the necessary steps to be

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taken, the part Sutherland must play during the next few days, then he added, "Is there any particular place to which you wish her sent? Have you any preference?"

"I've no experience of lunatic asylums," Martin replied grimly. "I will leave it in your hands." He paused, then added more gently than he had spoken hitherto, "I want her to be well treated, kindly looked after." He crossed the room and stared out of the window. "Do you wish me to see her again?" he asked. The prospect of another interview made him smart as though salt was being rubbed into an open wound.

"On no account. Your presence excited her to a dangerous degree. We telegraphed because your wife was calling so persistently for you yesterday that there was a possibility your presence might have quieted her; besides, it was necessary you should see for yourself how matters stood. Your coming, so far as she was concerned, has proved a failure."

There was scorn in his words, and Sutherland said sullenly: "I've always treated her well where money was concerned."

"Possibly." There was an absence of conviction in Boyd's tone. "She's overworked herself to an alarming degree," he added.

"There was no necessity. I provided amply for her needs. She had sufficient money to live quietly and deny herself none of the luxuries to which she was accustomed; though I'm not a rich man, I did what I could to keep her in comfort."

The steely eyes surveyed Martin.

"Possibly," the doctor repeated. "Still, she worked

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hard, whether from necessity or choice I can't tell, and work, worry, and religious mania have unhinged her brain."

"You don't believe me," Sutherland burst out fiercely. "Yet I'm telling you the truth. Why shouldn't I? I'm a journalist. I live by my work, and I've always sent her money in proportion to my means, though I've not seen her for years. But when we were together she made life intolerable with her religious mania, and besides—to be frank with you—I could get on better as a bachelor. After all, one's profession counts as something. I had my ambitions, big ambitions—have them still for that matter, and she—well, she hampered me on all sides." He hesitated, then continued harshly, "I was a sentimental idiot of twenty when I married her. At that age one dreams dreams, and they seem more real than realities. I built castles in the air and their foundations were more solid than the walls of Rome. Love in a cottage with a pretty woman was one of my dreams. I dreamt of success, with my wife by my side; I dreamt of peace, happiness, a home, love, all the pretty things that most romantic fools dream of, and like all other dreams they melted into air. I meant to be a great poet—I became a journalist because it paid better. The home resolved itself into these rooms; the helpmate proved herself a religious maniac! Romance cost me dear then; it's likely to cost me dearer now," he added bitterly as, with one of those visualisings of things beloved, the vision of Anne of the Marshland passed before him, and he compared that enchanting piece of womanhood at its fairest and most beguiling, with the crazed woman, with matted hair, vacant eyes, and

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crooking fingers that plucked at the counterpane and fought with the straps that bound her to the bed. She who represented all that was most horrible, most painful to him, she was also a woman. She was his wife! There was no romance there now.

The doctor's face lost its sternness as he watched the quick play of expression sweeping over Martin's countenance. The pain, the torment and fierce yet impotent fury within the man changed his own mood. Sutherland needed a measure of help, even as the woman upstairs needed it; the tersely spoken story wrung from the depths of the man's soul had touched him.

"Yes, yes, when one's heart and soul are in one's profession, it comes to represent something more than the bread and butter machine so many people seem to consider it. Still—" He paused, pursed his mouth, and shrugged his shoulders. Then conscience reasserted itself and urged him to upbraid his companion; to read him a lesson on the moral responsibilities of the husband towards the wife; but sympathy for the man, so intensely alive, so filled with ambitions, silenced him. He, too, had his ambitions and ideals, and he understood.

"You say you're a journalist," he remarked, after a pause. Sutherland's face hardened.

"Yes," he answered with the quickness of an overwrought, sensitive nature alert for a possible sneer. "Yes, I belong to the profession which I have heard described as the slums and stews of literature; a profession which you, like most people, probably sneer at as superficial and vulgar. The profession which big men cringe to in private and revile in public. I suppose you imagine that no journalist keeps his ideals or his

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honesty, that he is willing to barter his birthright of honour for the pottage of saleable news."

Anger burnt in his narrow eyes as they met the doctor's, with the strange compelling gaze that had held Anne's long ago.

"No, I don't. Journalism is a fine profession if its results are ephemeral, but it requires a brain of no ordinary calibre for success." The quiet tones contrasted with Sutherland's fierceness and soothed for a moment his wounded feelings. "In your case, it was personal ambition, not the profession, that induced you to act as you have done. A great temptation no doubt—but cruel to the woman."

"I know," Martin hesitated, then he continued more evenly, "but it meant starvation if we remained together. I should have degenerated into journalistic hack, for she sapped one's brain, lowered one's vitality, numbed one's faculties. That's why I left her. It sounds brutal, stated like that, but she was impossible. She burnt work over which I had toiled for months because she thought it wrong. She wanted to sell our all and give it to the poor. After I left she evidently acted on that principle, for the money I sent her went to blood-sucking parsons and whining impostors who fooled her. Rather than ask for more, I suppose she got work as a typist, and even that money went in charity—charity—charity. That's the end of her charity and religion—and their begging and whining—a mad woman!"

His voice grew harsh and swift, for the torment of his thoughts, the memory of Anne, forced themselves upon him and filled his soul with bitterness. Between

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the life of pinching penury he had once led in this dingy house and the physical and mental luxury for which he had exchanged it, how great a gulf was fixed!

Suddenly the singing was resumed overhead:

“There where no troubles distraction can bring,
We the sweet anthems of Zion shall sing.”

The voice died in a wail, followed by a series of cries intermingled with profane oaths and curses, and the doctor rushed out of the room and up the creaking stairs in response to the nurse’s call for help.

Sutherland sat down on the three-legged horsehair sofa, buried his face in his hands and pressed his fingers over his ears to exclude the hideous sounds as he stared through the closed half of the window, patterned with tear marks drawn by recent rain on the grime of ages. A dirty lace curtain fluttered in the breeze, and from the street came the hoarse cry of a fruit-seller, wheeling a barrow of squashed over-ripe plums. Yesterday he had listened to the laughter of the gulls on the marshes, to-day he sat in the “first-floor front” of this dingy house close to the point where St. George’s Road merged in the New Kent Road. Truly life was made up of contrasts at once ludicrous and pathetic!

The fruit-seller’s voice died away as he turned down another street. The sounds of strife overhead subsided, and gradually his wife’s voice, ceasing its alternate singing and obscenity, sank into silence and the doctor reappeared, heated and dishevelled.

“She’s sleeping now, thoroughly exhausted,” he said, wiping his face as he sat down opposite Sutherland. “It’s no good your staying here, Mr. Grubb; if you will

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leave me your London address, I will write to you when I need you again." Producing a notebook he waited.

Sudden shame possessed Martin, and he hesitated to give his name and address. At last he said curtly, "Martin Sutherland, 400 Mount Street."

The doctor entered it without comment. Certainly it was an improvement on Grubb! Replacing the book in his pocket, he said, with a return of his old frigidity, "You shall hear from me as soon as possible."

Sutherland rose. "Thanks, I'm very grateful to you," he answered unsteadily; and a moment later, found himself in the narrow street, walking swiftly westwards.

Cabs were scarce in the neighbourhood, and the tramcars, bearing their miscellaneous crowd, repelled him at this moment of contending emotions, so he walked on, blind to the sordid aspect of the streets through which he passed until, pausing for a moment at the crossing into St. George's Road, he looked up, and the recollection of days long past surged over him.

How often in those bygone years had he trudged along these same pavements? In the heat of summer or through the murk of winter, he had walked to and from the newspaper office, where the burring of the machinery hastened the passage of his pencil over the strips of paper before him. How often, weary from the strain and stress of it all, had he questioned whether life was a possession worth retaining? Yet, had his existence been threatened by extinction, he would, he knew, fight to the utmost to keep the very thing whose value he questioned. Slowly, without influence or money to aid him, he had succeeded where his fellows failed.

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Work came to him, success, and he blossomed into a recognised authority on certain aspects of politics and art. His path cleared itself, professionally, his cup was filled with the wine of success, all the sweeter by reason of the labour its attainment had necessitated, and yet, beneath its seeming excellence had laid the fear of being delivered into the hands of mockers whose gibes would crucify his soul. The world into which he had penetrated would not be slow to convert its admiration of Martin Sutherland, the witty writer and brilliant conversationalist, into contempt of Martin Grubb, the Fleet Street hack, with a religious maniac as wife, for Milly was capable of any mad act if convinced that she was snatching a brand from the burning. He had forgotten these things latterly but now they returned to him, and he recalled his first meeting with Milly, a typist in an office. Her freshness had pleased him. His air of refinement, the veneer of good breeding which he had always possessed, and which placed him far above his class, had attracted her. They were young, and married on his "prospects." For a time they were happy; he tolerantly amused by her religious bias, and her primitive creed, her blind acceptance of Biblical stories in their literal sense amazed him, so that on one occasion he explained how much of the Old Testament was allegorical, and how much was symbolic in the New; but she regarded him almost as Anti-Christ, so he avoided the subject, and left her to the delight of those long sermons and hellfire denunciations which appealed to her.

When their child was born she christened it Theodore, since, as she declared, it was a gift of God; and its death, three months later, affected her to an

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abnormal extent. She beheld therein a visitation of God, a punishment for insufficient piety on her part and for Martin's godless absorption in a form of work which she regarded with suspicion. Literature was she felt a "sinful calling;" for her rigid creed denied all beauty and held all art to be evil. Possessed of this idea she searched the scriptures for derogatory references to scribes which she cast in his teeth, and with the blind faith of the fanatic, she declared that "the Lord would provide" if Martin renounced his profession and they left themselves in His hands. Refusing to agree, he was met by a torrent of reproaches concerning his lack of faith. To argue was useless, so he left her to her own devices, and from stubborn fanaticism she passed to phases of violence, and often when he reached home, weary with work, he would be greeted with reproaches and the remark that "the pen of the scribes was vain"; that "of making many books there was no end, while much study was a weariness of the flesh."

Such treatment was not calculated to improve a man who hungered for comprehension and sympathy; and the gulf between them widened, as, through her spiritual excesses, life with her became impossible, and Sutherland lived in daily dread as to whither her crazes might lead them. His work brought him home in the small hours of the morning, when Milly, being as a rule plunged in the heavy sleep of exhaustion following some day of religious exaltation, spared him the diatribes which otherwise began the moment he opened the door. Sometimes, however, she remained awake and received him with reproaches concerning the hour of his return, accusing him of sins he had neither the desire nor the

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energy to commit, until he would fly from her vituperations, fearful of losing his self-control and retaliating in some brutal manner. Weary in body, sick at heart, he used to wander along the streets and down the Embankment till dawn rolled the curtains of night from off the sleeping world, and the calm silence brought him a measure of consolation. The figures huddled on the benches aroused within him a sense of shame that he should despair when such infinitely greater misery confronted him; and stirred by pity, he talked to the men numbed with cold, or dulled with the drink which alone brought relief from their misery. Strange histories were unfolded to him concerning the depths of lives whose poignant sadness haunted him, and he obtained an insight into that pitiful nether world on which great cities pile themselves. His outlook widened, his feelings towards humanity grew tenderly pitiful, until the very fount of his tenderness was sealed by Milly's final act.

For months he had, in his spare hours, laboured at a poem that was nearing completion, when his wife in a fit of religious zeal destroyed it. She stood before him defiant, exalted by her action. The poem, she declared, was sinful in its intent and had occupied him to the exclusion of holier matters, therefore she had "glorified the Lord in the fires, even the Lord God of Israel," making of it a "burnt offering and a sweet smelling sacrifice unto the Lord," through whose medium Martin, the sinner, might yet attain salvation.

The scene that ensued ended in his removing himself and his belongings to a garret near Fleet Street, and this emancipation from the stultifying atmosphere of home marked the turning point of his career, for his

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mental faculties ripened apace in his freedom. Though his means were limited, a due proportion went to his wife, and as his income increased, he added to that allowance, but how she spent it he never asked, nor was he aware of her reduced circumstances. That she typed again in an office and worked ceaselessly in the slums, he had not suspected until this afternoon, for he had long ceased to visit her, the meetings being so painful that by mutual consent they had long been abandoned. Milly indeed had faded to a memory during the last ten years, though sometimes he received communications from her in the shape of texts, framed, glazed, and bearing such lurid warnings as "Woe to the scribes that write grievousness," or "Beware of the scribes which desire to walk in long robes and love greetings in the markets and the chief rooms at feasts, the same shall receive greater damnation." But these petty annoyances ceased to trouble him as slowly but steadily the longed-for life of success approached its realisation. Throughout those years he lived as other men live, following his bent in the great city where sin may be sinned in such secrecy that none can discern the ways even of their best beloved. Women passed transiently enough, across his daily life, scarcely ruffling its face, until Anne appeared. She appealed powerfully to him, though he fought against it from a vague sense of loyalty towards Philip, whose qualities he appreciated, despite those hampering limitations which roused his mirth.

To-day he thought of all these things and reviewed the half-forgotten years as he walked homewards, and the sun was low when he paused on Westminster Bridge and looked down at the river running sluggishly beneath

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him, as Big Ben chimed a quarter-past seven, and workmen, pipe in mouth, marched in little groups towards the side of the river whence Sutherland had come. Westwards, against a fiery sunset, the Houses of Parliament stood sharply defined; eastwards the cupola of St. Paul's loomed massively from amid the tapering grace of the city spires, and below him the full tide of the tawny hued river swirled against the pillars of the bridge. His mind diverted for a second from his meditations, by his surroundings, passed once more to the afternoon's events, and the inscrutability of a Providence which prolonged such a life as Milly's. He thought of her as she had flung herself upon him with an inarticulate cry of fury, her crooking fingers trying to clutch his throat, as she cried that he was her murderer, that he had dragged her down to hell. He pictured her again strapped to the iron bedstead, her eyes fixed inimically on his as a torrent of foul language alternating with objurations that he should pray for her and for himself poured from her lips.

He had done his best to calm her, laying his hands on hers, as they plucked at the straps that bound her; he sickened now at the thought of her hands bruised and torn, the nails bleeding from the savage manner in which she had bitten them to the quick. It was a hideous memory, and his face sank abruptly on his arms as they rested on the parapet of the bridge. A passing policeman, suspicious of his attitude, watched him until, becoming conscious of his scrutiny, Martin looked up. The man's watchful eye angered him; then he laughed harshly, and with an impatient movement swung down Bridge Street as the constable's curious gaze followed him.

CHAPTER X

ANNE GROWS ANGRY

THE rain fell steadily with a monotonous drip from the leaden sky, for September, with the inconstancy of the English climate, had leapt without warning into mid-autumn. The small fire that burnt on the open hearth was by no means unwelcome in the gloomy dampness of the day, and Anne sat close to it, staring at the ashes beneath the smouldering logs. She was out of spirits and there were black circles round her eyes while the sullenness of her mouth marred its beauty.

Silence reigned in the room, broken by the persistent scratching of Eleanor Howard's pen, as that lady, seated in the window, wrote assiduously. She kept up a voluminous correspondence with her friends and relations, although few people answered her effusions; partly because there was nothing in them worth answering, partly because they knew she was happy maintaining a scribbled monologue. As she finished a letter, she flung it on the floor, and varied her work with disjointed comments on the people to whom she was writing. Throughout the afternoon Anne's thoughts had been interrupted by these spasmodic remarks: "I was so glad he was so wonderfully well last time George and I were there," she said suddenly.

Anne looked up from the fire. "Who? What?" she asked vaguely.

"David, of course. I was writing a line to dear

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Clover. He was *so* wonderfully well, poor fellow, and *so* bright and happy."

She paused to lick an envelope, and Anne frowned.

"Isn't there a stamp-damper?" she asked reproachfully.

"Oh yes, dear, of course, but I *quite* forgot to use it, *too* stupid of me." To remedy the neglect she redamped the envelope with the little silver-topped brush. "It's *such* a happy marriage, and they're *so* devoted to one another, dear people. Of course, happiness has made *all* the difference in the world to David."

Lady Inescourt as not interested in the Southminsters, but she said, with some show of concern, "It was an odd marriage, and hardly satisfactory at first?"

"Oh, but he was in love with her for *ever* so long before they married; only he fancied no woman would ever care for him now that he's so crippled."

"Nor did Clover if all reports are true."

"Oh, that was nonsense about Jim and her. Poor Jim, it was *so* sad his getting killed in that dreadful war, for I believe he would have got the V.C. if he had lived. He was *so* good-looking and *too* attractive." She sighed and added, "He was *everything* to poor David and made all the difference to his life till Clover came."

"Yes, Lucy must have been a trial. She would drive me mad in a week."

"But she's *so* good and *so* kind."

"Yes, and Greyford's *so* dull that probably a little more or less dullness didn't matter much to David." Anne spoke with a contemptuous laugh.

"Oh, but it did; only he's *so* angelic and patient about everything that he *never* would let one see *how*

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trying he found it. He *never* complained about that or anything."

Her sister-in-law's habit of seeing perfection in everybody irritated Anne, and she remarked curtly, that she was no judge of Southminster. "I generally let Phil go to Greyford alone; they are his relations, and the less they see of me the better pleased they are."

"Oh, you're *quite* wrong, they *love* seeing you, but of course David knows it's not very gay for you at Greyford. Only last week he said, when we were there, that he *so* wished he saw more of you."

An incredulous smile crossed Anne's face. She had no intention that the desire should be gratified, for Southminster disquieted her by the unpleasant conviction that nothing escaped his grey eyes, and she made no reply to her companion's last remark but continued to gaze absent-mindedly into the fire as Eleanor resumed her writing and the silence remained unbroken for a while.

"I wonder if she will *ever* marry him, don't you?" Mrs. Howards pen flourished an ornate signature on the paper. "It would be *so* suitable, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure it would if I knew whom you were talking about."

"Of course, I *quite* forgot you didn't know I was writing to dear old Mim. I meant it would be *so* good if she could finally make up her mind to marry Jack Frazer." Turning herself in the chair, she faced Anne she licked another envelope. "There I forgot the stamp-damper again," she exclaimed as she rose and crossed to the fire with a refreshing stretch of her long arms above her head. "Quite a good morning's work, isn't

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it?" She indicated with pride the letter-strewn corner she had vacated.

"Do you always write so much?" Anne asked with some amusement.

"Not at home, there isn't time, but letter-writing's a *great* thing when one's staying away."

"It's a splendid excuse to escape the boredom of a shooting party." Leaning forward Anne rang the bell. "Benson had better take them, for the second post ought to be here at any minute; its late already."

As the butler entered, she told him to collect the missives lying on the floor. Knowing Eleanor, he glanced through them, and found a couple of letters not addressed, to which he called her attention.

"Oh, *how* stupid of me. Now I wonder who those are to." She nibbled her finger as she meditated. "*Too* stupid of me."

When the servant departed, Anne remarked, with a laugh, "It's well old Benson knows your ways, Nell, or those letters wouldn't have got far."

Eleanor laughed good-temperedly. "Yes, isn't it like me?" she said as she strolled to the window, beat a tune on the glass with her fingers, and suggested a walk, the rain having ceased. Anne hesitated, her eyes flew to the clock again.

"Shall we wait till the post's in?"

Eleanor agreed, and sitting on the hearthrug, possessed herself of the paper in which she studied the news to a running fire of comments.

It was by no means the first time that Anne had questioned irritably concerning the post. A fortnight had elapsed since Sutherland's abrupt departure, he

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had vouchsafed no sign, and Anne's restlessness had increased as the days passed in unbroken silence. Finally she had written asking for news, and expressing a hope that his sister was better. To that letter no reply had come, though she pinned her hopes feverishly on every delivery, and she had begun to question the genuineness of the telegram which summoned him peremptorily to London. Apt as she was to jump at conclusions, she fancied that something more lay behind it than he had chosen to tell her. The hidden reason could only be a rival, and the thought galled her when she recalled the episode on the marsh in which she had so plainly shewn he was indispensable to her. The more she thought of matters the more suspicious did she become, the more clearly did she comprehend how little she really knew of the man, his past life, his family, or any of the intimate things which he would naturally tell the woman whom he admitted to his intimacy.

To her, as to most women, intimacy meant torrential out-pouring. She could not understand that in the closest intimacies there are reserves, to the greater friendships, there is a certain limit. Sutherland's reticence had now assumed abnormal proportions to her mind, and she was in the truly feminine mood to "see through a brick wall to what doesn't exist on the other side," and her soul sickened within her. Thinking of these things she paid little heed to Eleanor's trickle of talk, till Philip's voice, loud and cheerful, sounded in the hall, and a moment later he burst into the room.

Fresh, vigorous, full of the animal spirits which characterised him, he laughed at his wife, calling her "an old froust" and flinging open the window, he said:

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"It's so beastly fuggy here, why on earth don't you both go out for a walk? It's ripping now."

Anne objected that it was wet. "And I hate getting soaked," she added, determined not to feel annoyed by his good-tempered cheerfulness.

"Why, the rain stopped ages ago," he retorted, "And I want you both to come and see that new horse; he's a clinker."

Anne made no attempt to quit her place by the fire, and Philip said anxiously, "Aren't you well, old girl?"

"Oh, yes, dear, thanks, quite well."

"Then what's the matter? Don't you want to come out?"

"Yes, presently." She glanced at the clock again, "I am waiting for the second post. I can't think why it's so late."

His face fell. "Oh, by Jove, I quite forgot. I met Thompson in the village and took the letters from him." Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he pulled them out.

Anne's voice was peevish. "You oughtn't to do that; they might have been forgotten altogether, and you never know if there isn't something important. Besides, a hundred yards wouldn't kill that lazy man." She watched her husband's clumsy movements as he sorted the letters, her own fingers twitching with impatience. "Any for me?" she asked.

"Yes, one, two, three—oh, four."

As he threw them on the table beside her, she scrutinised the envelopes anxiously.

They were uninteresting enough, and she flung them fretfully on a table as she questioned her husband again.

"Are you sure there are no more; that you haven't

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made a muddle and kept any of mine with yours?"'

Eleanor, absorbed in the reading of her post, exclaimed: "*Too* interesting, George writes that the bailiff's wife at home has got twins. I'm so glad."

Her sister-in-law offered no remark, and Mrs. Howard read extracts from her husband's letter, whilst Anne, maddened with impatience, watched the packet of letters Philip had drawn from his pocket.

"Here," let me look," she said in a sharp tone, unable to restrain her anxiety. He stared at her in surprise.

"What a hurry you're in. One would think you were a school-girl expecting something from her best young man," he answered, with his good-natured laugh. Then, after glancing through the letters, he added, "There is another for you after all; I'm sorry, it had evidently got stuck to mine."

Her eyes lighted, for it was from Sutherland; and announcing her intention of dressing for the walk, she made good her escape.

Once in her bedroom she tore open the envelope, but the communication was brief in length and colder than any she had received from him. He acknowledged her letter, saying he must remain in London owing to his sister's critical condition, that he was working hard and could find little time in which to write. It was the form more than the matter of the letter that wounded her, for she was quick to see the omission of all reference to the walk in which they had sworn eternal friendship; the absence of all regret for the shortness of his visit, or his abrupt departure, and there was no mention of anything more to follow, nor did he ask her to write to him.

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She realised as she stood before the dressing table staring blankly at her own reflection in the mirror, that the break had come, and she was furious that it was he, not she, who had snapped the chain. A paroxysm of wrath shook her at the thought that she had been fooled, for what else had his manner been intended to convey but the fact that he was tired of her? She hated him; longed for revenge, and in her fury, drove her nails into the palms of her hands till they left blue and purple lines on the whiteness of her skin. Since she could not hurt him, she would hurt herself. Everything was subserviated to that frenzied desire to hurt somebody or something, and her voice choked with a sob of inarticulate rage as she turned from the table, her hands gripping the letter, her face haggard. The instinct to kill, seethed within her, as Philip shouted up the stairs to know whether she had done "prinking before the glass."

The familiar sound thrust her abruptly from the tragic altitude of passion and vengeance to the commonplace level of daily life, and for a second the revulsion produced the natural and feminine desire to cry. A hard sob rose in her throat, but she choked it back angrily. She would shed no tears for a man who deserted her; there should be no weakness, no repining. Fury goaded her into spurious courage, as she crushed a cap on her head and ran swiftly down stairs to her husband.

Sutherland's letter was the outcome of mixed emotions, for Milly's reappearance as a calculable quantity in his affairs had awakened within him a sense of shame, and he knew that even such a marriage as his

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demanded more than he had vouchsafed it, since baldly stated, he had deserted his own wife and tried to seduce another man's. The meanness of this attitude lowered him the more in his own sight, because hitherto he had held a pre-eminent position among his fellows, whether at his work—and there is no place so democratic as a newspaper office—or among the artificial and unhealthy Affinities. His wife's condition had startled him from his philanderings, and it was easy in this mood to decree that Anne should pass out of his life, although she represented to him many sweet and pleasant things against which he now turned in disgust. He even persuaded himself that he felt distaste for her, resentment at her attempt to break down the barrier he had erected between them, and he persuaded himself that the barrier had been real, not a toy earth-work thrown up as a challenge to her combativeness.

He paid his wife weekly visits, as a form of penance and the penance was severe to a sensitive man, for it was impossible to forecast her condition. Sometimes she received him with pleasure, and but for her incessant harping on the religious question, gave no sign of her affliction. At others, she cried out against him, saying he had dragged her down to the nethermost hell. She would even attempt violence and clutch at him with those murderous crooking fingers that he had felt about his throat that hideous day in her lodgings; her eyes would gleam like those of a prisoned animal as she crouched in a corner of the room gnawing her hands and making strange inarticulate sounds more bestial than human. On these occasions he would return home with a heavy heart, questioning how far he was responsible for her state? 156

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Fortunately work left him little time for brooding or meditation in those days, and proved an efficient stimulus to the treading of the narrow path which he was resolved to pursue. He had returned to the drudgery of daily journalism because it afforded less time for thought and provided him with additional means to meet the expenses entailed by his wife's maintenance, and the resumption of his old life brought a resumption of old habits. He wandered once more on the Embankment, welcoming the coolness from the river after the suffocating heat of the office. He would watch with appreciative eye the pale primrose of the dawn steal across the sky, till the rising sun touched with its glamour the monstrous blocks of buildings that fringed the water, and the long white front of Somerset House glowed rosily in the quickening light. He fraternised again with the world's fallen—his acquired cynicism dropped from him, and in this sloughing of his social skin, he returned to his better self. The Affinities, with their affectations and skimmings, became faint shadows against the background of his busy life; Anne faded into a pale but fragrant memory on which he seldom cared to dwell. The lust of work gripped him, for he was by nature strenuous, his instincts those of the hustler and the fighter, and the song of the city humming in his ears, urged him onwards till he rejoiced in the fierceness of the struggle. But all things have their term, and when summer and autumn had glided by and winter was already far advanced, chance intervened and blotted out his good resolutions.

It was on a foggy afternoon late in January, that, crossing the roadway by Hyde Park Corner, he heard

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his name called and the Rosendales' motor pulled up against the curb, as its owner leant out of the window. He listened to her reproaches at his desertion, but made no reply, offered no excuses. The Affinities had been puzzled and a trifle disconcerted at his disappearance, whilst the mystery enshrouding his whereabouts sharpened their curiosity. Anne, rarely seen, had proved loth to discuss him, and the only solution lay in a quarrel of some kind, which Lady Rosendale was determined to run to ground.

"You must and shall come home with me," she declared, and although he made excuses she would accept none. Perhaps he was rather half-hearted, for he was tired and ruffled in temper after several months spent in uncongenial society, varied by solitude and haunting thoughts of his wife. Surely there could be no harm in accepting the invitation to tea now that he was completely free from the trammels of Lady Rosendale's world?

So he went; what else could he do? And the motor rolled pleasantly to the house in Grosvenor Square where he had first met Anne.

Once she had secured her victim, his hostess questioned him on his work, his abode, his plans, etc. But he turned her questions skilfully when necessary, or made answers of a non-committal order that told her little. As he sat in the hot room redolent with heavily-scented flowers, he felt a trifle dazed, his senses stirred by a rush of emotions at finding himself in the place which next to Stiffborough was the most reminiscent of Anne. Somehow her presence permeated the room oppressively, and he learnt that she had left the previous

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day. The news aroused disturbing thoughts within him. He had not imagined the old spell could have retained so much strength, and he was angry with himself for an unsuspected weakness, angry with Anne for possessing a greater power over him than he had credited her with. His discomfort was increased when Lady Rosendale informed him that Lady Inescourt was far from well, the doctors having expressed uneasiness concerning the state of her lungs. Yet, she added, in the face of such an alarming possibility, Anne rushed from place to place with restless energy.

"She seems possessed of fifty thousand demons of unrest, poor darling; and it saddens one to see so rare and perfect a woman wearing herself to a shadow to no purpose." Darting a shrewd glance at the man, she added, "There is something more than meets the eye in it all, and I attribute a good deal to that hopeless husband of hers."

He answered rather sharply that Philip was a good fellow, a devoted husband. Lady Rosendale shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you really think so?"

"Most certainly."

"Poor Anne!"

"Why do you say that?" He spoke curtly, hating the subject in which he was antangled, yet unable to escape from it without rousing his hostess's suspicions.

"Isn't there good cause for pity? Fancy what her life must be with that dull-witted fool."

"Her life is as she makes it."

"How like a man! You seem to think a woman capable of accomplishing the impossible."

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"I think Lady Inescourt a clever woman who knows how to manage the man she has married; a man who allows her freedom to do as she pleases."

"Have you quarrelled?"

"Why should we? What could we quarrel about?"

"A thousand things."

"I know of none." He hesitated for a moment, then said quietly: "You imagine these things because I seem to have vanished lately, isn't that so?" She nodded, and he resumed, "To tell you the truth I have been, and still am, forced to work hard. Money is low and I have to keep a—relation—who is stranded in the world."

Lady Rosendale's curiosity was roused, and she questioned Martin closely, as he intended she should, for he suspected that all he said would be repeated to Anne, and he longed to stand well with her and with that little world in which he had shone brilliantly. Insidiously the spell of his surroundings worked upon him, and an hour elapsed before he rose to depart.

"Come and see me again soon," Lady Rosendale pleaded, as she held his hand and bade him good-bye.

"Coming here will be good for you, and if you are working hard a change will be an excellent thing."

He smiled. "I shall be delighted," he said, but he had no intention of repeating the experiment; it was too enervating.

"And shall I ask Anne to meet you?"

"It would be delightful."

After that, he found himself dwelling on Anne; her image grew more vivid until it became an obsession. Every time he had refused an invitation of Lady Rosendale's the effort was greater, his mind was more obsessed

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with thoughts of Anne, with anxiety concerning her health, and as these things crowded his life, Milly faded into the background. His good resolves shrank; longing for the woman he loved tormented him till temptation was strong within him to seek her out, and fling all his good resolutions to the winds.

On Anne's side, too, the months dragged wearily. If she had accepted Sutherland's silence, acquiesced perforce in the fact that he no longer wished to hear from her; the knowledge rankled none the less fiercely, and her wrath was hot within her when Lady Rosendale spoke of her meeting with Martin.

"He was the ghost of his old self, white and haggard, restless, miserable," she declared with an exaggeration well calculated to soften Anne's heart towards the absentee. "Why haven't you looked after him better, my dear?"

Lady Inescourt replied acidly that she was not Sutherland's keeper, nor had she seen him for months, as she had been too busy. But the arrow had found its mark, her thoughts flew like homing pigeons towards Martin now that she knew his recall from Stiffborough had been genuine.

Time passed uneventfully after that, until the spring was well advanced, and walking up Rotten Row one brilliant May morning, Anne found herself confronted by the man who filled her thoughts. Perhaps it was the awakening life on all sides of her, the sense of the sap rising in trees and plants, that gave her a certain recklessness, a disregard of consequences and induced her to greet him with such unfeigned delight, that he, anxiously scanning her face for signs of illness, was

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amazed at its vitality and beauty. They passed under the pale green of the newly-breaking limes to the shady reaches of Kensington Gardens, where, bordering a deserted path, daffodils spread their golden beauty, and the delicate bells of the hyacinth scented the air, all a-quiver with the song of thrushes and blackbirds, and the contented cooing of fat wood-pigeons.

They had avoided meeting one another's gaze in Rotten Row, but here, free from the restrictions imposed by inquisitive glances of passers-by, they faced one another fully, frankly expressing gladness more by the language of the eyes than through the medium of words. He upbraided her for not informing him of her presence in London; she blamed him for his silence and indifference throughout the past months; and waiting for no excuses, she continued:

"I thought you were tired of me, and I wouldn't make any effort to recall you if you wished to go." Her voice was proud, her expression hardened, swept as she was by the memory of those bitter days in which she had vainly waited for some sign from him.

"Tired of you! Was it likely? You know in your heart of hearts you thought nothing of the kind."

She shrugged her shoulders. "How can one tell with a man?" she objected.

He accused her of lack of faith, of an inclination to credit him with evil.

Resting her arms on the iron rails that fenced the grass, she laughed, with the little toss of her head, the little crooked smile that he knew so well.

"Wasn't it natural considering the way you behaved?" She turned her eyes on him; they were full

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of merriment, dancing with the gladness of this unexpected meeting.

"Why didn't you write? Why didn't you tell me where you were and what you were doing?"

His face clouded; for a second he failed to reply, and she, watching him closely, detected the hesitation, the expression almost of fear that crossed it.

Then he said slowly: "I was in trouble. Trouble too sore to seek comfort from anybody." He paused, adding under his breath, "Least of all from you."

The memory of Milly had fallen on him like some blighting shadow, the brightness died from his face, his mouth fell in set lines.

"Why? Surely we had agreed to be friends, 'truest, warmest, closest friends.' Those were your very words to me that day on the marshes. Don't you remember?"

Indeed he did! Were there any hours of those days which were not graven on his memory, sternly though he had sought to banish them? From the idle talk of Mrs. Chester to the moment when Anne handed him the fateful telegram, he remembered every incident.

"I know—I know. But I couldn't turn to you for help, it was impossible—quite impossible."

She shook her head, raising her eyes to his with her most radiant expression.

"Nothing is impossible between friends. Tell me what happened."

Again he hesitated, gazing down at her, half impelled to tell the truth and place that insurmountable barrier between them which the revelation of his past, and the existence of his wife must be, because Anne would resent his secrecy. He hated his deceit, yet he

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dared not tell her the truth so, in the fewest possible words he spoke of the hard work necessitated in order to maintain his “sister” in the asylum; and carried away by his own acting he drew a graphic picture of the interview in the by-street off St. George’s Road, of the scenes now when he revisited Milly. Encouraged by Anne’s sympathy, he enlarged on his struggles during the past months, his decision to work, and to think only of his “sister” and her welfare. He concealed nothing but the all-important truth which he wished to conceal, and a happy hour elapsed before they parted with reiterated promises to meet often whilst she remained in London, to write constantly when she returned to Stiffborough.

As they went their separate ways, each knew that time and absence had but served to strengthen the links that bound them one to another.

CHAPTER XI

THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER

CHERISHING as she did a sentimental affection for the Rosendales' London house, the scene of her first meeting with Martin, Anne readily accepted an invitation the following July to spend a few weeks there. The time flew pleasantly till one Sunday, her host and hostess being away, Anne found herself in sole possession of the house, and Sutherland, who had seldom left her side during her visit, had after accompanying her to a Queen's Hall concert, returned to tea in Grosvenor Square.

"Divine, wasn't it?" she exclaimed, sinking down on the sofa.

"Though foreigners accuse us, as a nation, of lacking the musical and artistic sense! However you can't be found guilty on that count, loving the beautiful as you do, in all forms of art."

She smiled at his compliment; he seldom jarred on her now with his old fulsomeness.

"How dull life would be without art," she remarked sententiously. "I wonder which art one could best dispense with?"

"Everything is an art, life itself the most difficult of all."

She pulled a wry face at his words. "Then there are some unpleasant forms of art," she said.

"Matrimony?" he suggested.

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She shrugged her shoulders. "Possibly—"

"You aren't the first woman who has found it a hopeless job." He pushed a dish of strawberries towards her. "It's no good thinking about it now, you had better eat those excellent strawberries and put unpleasant things from your mind; they'll force themselves on you in a day or so."

She ignored the fruit, and beat a devil's tattoo on the cloth with her fingers, as she stared moodily before her. "Yes, soon enough," she rejoined curtly.

"How much are you looking forward to the delights of Stiffborough? To the prospects of a tête-à-tête with Philip again; of hearing about his flocks and herds; the harvest prospects, or the likelihood of its being a good year for partridges?" He paused, but seeing her silent, continued: "Well, it will be a contrast to this, and contrasts are among the most desirable things in life. I, too, shall be experiencing a contrast in my surroundings, I too shall be enjoying peaceful solitude for a month or so."

Her eyes sought his swiftly—suspiciously. "You are coming to Stiffborough, aren't you?"

"No, my plans are changed."

"Why?"

"For many reasons—some of them quite feminine in their unreason."

He smiled a trifle maliciously at her, as he sat with his hands hanging down between his knees, the finger tips meeting and parting with a little steady movement. "My plans are changed; I'm going away—immediately," he said.

"Where?"

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"To an out of the way part of Austria."

"Why?"

He looked up and met her angry gaze. "Because it pleases me."

"Pleasure, not business?" Her voice was sharp with anger at his disregard of a promise to follow her to Stiffborough, and she questioned whether her power had waned. It was her constant dread in these days.

"Yes, pleasure and the desire to revisit places where I spent many happy days before I yoked myself to journalism." His mind reverted to the dreams he had dreamt, the airy castles he had built, when, two years before Milly crossed his path, he had wandered through those valleys and woods. How he had schemed in those sunny years of hope and youth! What great poems he meant to write! What fame he intended to acquire! And now—ah, well, "dreams that were over, days that were done!" He shrugged his shoulders, seeking to harden himself against such disturbing memories, but the spell of his lost ideals seized him, his voice grew gentle, his expression softened as he said, "I long for those solitudes in which nature

'Crowds us with her thronging wood,
Her many hands reach out to us,
Her many tongues are garrulous.' "

A smile transformed his countenance, and Anne recognised the vein of dreaming content that drew her to him by its suggestion of fine though thwarted aspirations, of crushed ideals that struggled to reach the light of day. She always longed to cherish these poor crushed things, to aid them in their struggles,

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to foster his more gentle moods. But he seldom responded to her attempts nowadays, hastily burying any transitory softness under his usual cynicism. Watching his face, she saw it lose its furtiveness, as in those same soft half unconscious tones in which he had described the Danish vessel being towed up the creek, he spoke of another loved land.

He drew for her vivid pictures of forests clinging to steep hillsides, and hushed in an eternal silence; of the song of little streams trickling over emerald moss, creeping round grey boulders, till, mated with their fellows, they swelled into leaping torrents that tore through the valleys to fill the lakes, sapphire and indigo in colour, lying far below. He spoke of the stillness and solitude of the long white roads, ribbons of dusty silver in the glaring brightness of the noon. And in his voice rang the craving for peace that possesses a man wearied by the mental and physical jostling of his fellows. He hungered at that time for the rainbow hues of the flowers, the fragrance of the pine trees, the calm hour, when dawn, pregnant with the approaching moment of sunrise, rolls back the silver mists of night, and kisses the cold chastity of snow-capped mountains to blushing beauty; or for the peaceful days, closing in hushed silence as the god of light slides over the edge of the horizon, loth to resign a world so fair to the grimness of approaching night.

“‘Cities give not the human senses room enough’” he said impatiently. “One realises it in places like that where there is room to grow broader in mind, cleaner in spirit; where one’s lungs expand with the sharp air as one’s soul expands through con-

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tact with nature. That's why I long for the valleys, the hills, the lakes, the great amphitheatre of snowy mountains, the infinity of space that lies beyond them all."

He paced the room as he spoke, too much stirred by the working of his imagination to remain still. His face was alight, his eyes shone. He was gripped by the gracious beauties of nature, and the artist within him awakened by these things, dominated the beast, transforming him to the poet and idealist he always represented to Anne. And yet as she watched him, jealousy stole over her because she knew herself forgotten, excluded from those dear dreams of his. Present and future were swept from his mind by memories of the past, by hopes for the future, and at the thought her jealousy turned to envy, to longing for the things he painted in this vivid fashion, and as he fell silent she leant back with a sigh.

"How envious you make me; how I long to wander, free from all ties, all duties, instead of vegetating at home."

Her words roused him. The rapt look vanished from his face; his expression coarsened. He became again the man of evil passions and desires, as leaning his hands on the table he bent towards her and said:

"Why not come?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "How can I? Philip hates all countries but his own, and thinks every foreigner a cad."

Sutherland laughed contemptuously. "A typical John Bull, with all the 'you be damnedness' of manner which makes us loathed abroad."

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He shot her a glance, then withdrew his hands from the table and straightened himself. Had she understood the purport of his question? As a matter of fact, she was too much preoccupied with her imaginary grievances to realise the most palpable things.

“Need you always be tied to Philip like a dog to a blind beggar? He hardly strikes me as a ‘very jealous man,’ ” he said.

Tired, overstrung by the excitement of her life and the heat of London, Martin’s descriptions had fanned her smouldering discontent with Stiffborough, her contempt for Philip and she laughed shrilly.

“Jealousy is the last thing I should ever accuse him of; I doubt if he knows the meaning of the word.”

“What a rara avis! I can’t conceive being married to a beautiful woman and not experiencing moments of frantic suspicion.”

Philip’s blind confidence had always pleased her, and she retorted that beautiful women were not necessarily false.

He looked at her with his old cynical smile. “They generally are.”

She was on the point of replying hotly, but conscience pricked her, and she questioned whether she was wholly free from the charge of falseness in thought. The idea ruffled her, and she sought to justify herself to Martin, and in a sense to herself, by vaunting Philip’s trust in her. “Phil lets me do as I please, thank goodness. He gives me absolute liberty.”

Her reply was evasive, but he made no comment, and rising, crossed the room, whistling softly to himself.

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"Why not come for a trip if you are so free? He would surely allow you a companion to guard and amuse you?"

Her gaze followed him as he walked away from her.

"I don't suppose Phil would object," she answered.

He raised his eyebrows. He had not the slightest belief in her statement, but he knew that it pleased her to talk at random sometimes. He also knew that, having embarked on an ocean of hypothetical situations, she would on no account return to the commonplace anchorage of truth. He saw her take a cigarette from a box by her side, then demand a light.

"So you're allowed perfect freedom?" As he held the match for her, their eyes met, his filled with ironical amusement, hers with petulance. Suddenly the old fear of him swept over her, her lips fell apart, she shrank back. "What do you say to that implicit confidence?" he asked mockingly.

"I'm glad."

He laughed.

"Why do you laugh like that?" she spoke quickly.

"Surprise—amused surprise. That's all." He faced her as she sat below him, the cigarette between her lips, its smoke curling above her head. "Surprise at you," he added after a momentary silence. "Women are too complex for a man's comprehension; and you are even stranger than most, compounded as you are of pride and innocence. Proud as the devil, yet simple as a child to submit to such a state of things as that."

Her curiosity was piqued, and she demanded an explanation; but he feigned regret for his speech.

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"Let's talk of something else," he said.

She insisted on further elucidation.

"No, no, that's enough on the subject." He seemed to brush the matter aside with a wave of his hand. "It's foolish to run a theme dry, besides if you think it over quietly you will understand. But you might get angry if I told you more."

It was an efficient goad, knowing as he did that a woman's curiosity will seldom permit of her leaving matters on the side of safety when it entails ignorance. For several moments he allowed her to press him to speak, then he did so with apparent unwillingness.

"Isn't it derogatory to you that he should be so indifferent?"

It was a fresh light on the situation, and her wrath flamed against Philip. "I don't see that it is," she retorted, anxious however, to disguise her mortification.

"Others do." He strolled across the room, his hands in his pockets. "I call it a covert insult," he said slowly.

She started, flushed, her hands closed so that her nails bit into the flesh of her palms. He had stung her this time.

Then he said regretfully: "I suppose I've offended you past forgiveness by saying what others think? But you insisted on knowing."

He paused to look at her, but she had regained her self-control, too proud to let him suspect her humiliation.

"Am I to go after such a speech?" he asked.

"Why should you? It's not your affair; you merely called my attention to something I hadn't

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troubled to consider.’’ She shrugged her shoulders, blew a smoke ring with leisurely indifference, and added, with a laugh: ‘‘After all, if I’m content, what does the world’s opinion count for? As a matter of fact, I think I shall encourage Phil, for jealousy would be a most inconvenient form of devotion.’’

He stared at her, deceived for the moment by her indifferent manner.

‘‘Of course, it’s of no account. If you’re content, why need you care a fig for the world’s—ridicule?’’ He paused slightly before the last word. ‘‘So, ‘all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.’ Since you’re happy, what more can your friends desire? A devoted wife, a blindly trusting husband. What a delightful idyll.’’ He laughed, his narrow eyes resting on her insolently. ‘‘To quote ‘Candide’ again, I see your idea of matrimony consists in being ‘une petite brune très docile?’ How comic! How I have misjudged you! How needlessly I have pitied you! It only shows how easily a man is deceived by a woman when she sets her mind on fooling him.’’

The quotation infuriated her. The last thing she desired was to appear as a happy or docile wife, and she rose with an impatient movement, crossed to the window, and pulling aside the sunblinds, stared over the parched square, as she digested the words ‘‘une petite brune très docile’’ and a covert insult. How dared Philip treat her thus? How could she have been so blind? She lashed herself into fury at the thought.

‘‘Why do you say such things? You’ve no business to say Phil is indifferent; you’ve no right to speak as

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you have done of him or of me," she cried, turning angrily on Sutherland.

"You forced me to; I merely tried to please you by giving the information you demanded."

"You haven't pleased me."

"Sorry—I did it for the best."

"That's an idiotic excuse."

"Again I annoy you—shall I go?"

"Certainly—if you wish to." She paused; angry, breathless, but her wrath had spent itself in words and when she saw the half tender, half mocking smile on his face, she repented. After all, he was not to blame, so why use him as a scapegoat for Philip's misdeeds?

"Don't go—I want you," she said softly. If she was valueless to her husband, this man at least appreciated her. Her vanity demanded admiration, and Martin could bestow it. "You don't want to go, do you?" she added softly.

"I want to stay."

She smiled at him, and in a voice veiled with a suggestion of restrained tears, murmured:

"I can't afford to lose my best—my dearest friend."

She checked herself, frightened at the expression that had leapt into his eyes, and she spoke hastily "Have another cigarette—the pipe of peace—and promise that you will say no more horrid things to me."

He looked at her for a second.

"I promise," he said, and a smile spread slowly over his face, while he helped himself to the "pipe of peace," lit it, walked the length of the room twice, then paused before the sofa where Anne sat. He dared

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not speak for a moment. He knew the desired hour had dawned and he felt the necessity of weighing every word before it passed his lips. At last he said in a low tone :

“I would promise anything you wished; do anything you asked; obey anything you decreed. Haven’t I given you proof of these things by now—Anne?”

She tried to laugh his remark aside, because there was a depth of feeling in it that frightened her, and she dreaded anything that tended to earnestness. But he refused to comply with her mood.

“Just now you were annoyed because I wasn’t coming to Stiffborough?” he said, harshly, and waited for a reply.

“Naturally. Everybody hates having their plans upset. However making plans is a woman’s chief delight, upsetting them is a man’s ‘*raison d’être*.’” She smiled, but his face was stern, so she ran on hastily : “You men are so contradictory; you make such a fuss about promises. You place—in theory—the sense of honour so high, and yet you break a promise to a woman as light-heartedly as a bird flies through the air.”

“I plead guilty to breaking my word in the matter of coming to your house. But it was not done light-heartedly. Women never understand that things can be done in all seriousness unless they are accompanied by tears, protestations, and all manner of alarms and excursions; yet the deepest tragedies are beyond tears, the most momentous events of life are wrought in silence.”

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She was mute, her eyes fixed on the cigarette in her hand ; then she flicked the ash on the carpet and scattered it with the toe of her shoe.

“Anyhow you broke your promise to a woman, is that honourable ?” she asked, sharply.

“Perhaps not if you put it in that bald way and make no allowance for extenuating circumstances.”

His lips twisted ironically. The question of honour was one he would have omitted from this discussion. There was a grim irony in the situation to which he was not blind.

“Since you wish to discuss the interesting question of points of honour you shall tell me whether it is more honourable to accept a man’s hospitality and friendship, when you are in love with his wife, or to break a promise made to the wife and so avoid temptation for yourself—and possibly for her ?”

Anne shot him a swift glance. They had reached the point she had dreaded ever since she first saw the danger of this thing, like the prophet’s cloud, “no bigger than a man’s hand” on the horizon of her life. It had grown until now it darkened her sky, whilst womanlike she had imagined that by thrusting the unpleasant from her mind she had thrust it out of existence. She saw now the futility of such attempts ; knew that she could no longer blind herself to the presence of the cloud. Nevertheless she tried to check him by saying pettishly :

“That has nothing on earth to do with the matter.”

“It has everything to do with it. Do you suppose that because I’ve kept silence, I don’t love you still ? Do you suppose that, because I came to Philip’s

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house, I wasn't ashamed of myself for doing so? Do you suppose that it has been a pleasant year and a half to live through? Do you suppose a man has no sense of honour in these things?" She bent her head until her face was hidden from him as he continued, "If I've kept silence I've thought and suffered bitterly. A year and a half ago you were unprepared, so I gave you time to think; I wanted you to weigh and understand things clearly. You have done so or you wouldn't have acted as you have acted for the past year."

"I've done nothing, said nothing, meant nothing. You're my friend—my truest, best friend—nothing more."

She spoke swiftly, her face haggard, as the old formula she had used by the willow-shaded stream slipped from her tongue. It was a safeguard, a suitable reminder at the present juncture of her good resolutions and for an instant it leant her a feeling of security. To him the words were a paltry excuse.

"You have kept me by your side, you have shewn me that I was indispensable to you," he retorted.

"No, no, I've done nothing of the kind."

"You've shewn me that you care for me; that's why I want you to come with me now—at once?"

He had brushed aside her excuses and leaning forward seized her arm roughly. She felt her strength ebbing as it had ebbed in the hall at Stiffborough, and she said weakly:

"I can't—I don't know."

"Good God, you must know whether you care for me or not," he cried. Vacillation was intolerable to

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him. “You must know, you must understand that I love you, I want you to come with me—don’t you see.”

He paused, at a loss for means of expression—awkward as some school-boy blurting out his calf-love. He had counted on a torrent of language, a fervid eloquence that would annihilate the barricades of scruple behind which she had entrenched herself—and now words failed him at the crucial moment. He realised that his speech so far had savoured of force rather than appeal; that the artifices of tenderness had deserted him in his hour of need. Maddened at his impotence he seized her in his arms and drew her to him. If his tongue played him false he must have recourse to action, though he revolted from such barbarous methods.

“Let me go,” she cried, and fought for freedom. But her struggles were ineffectual as those of the gulls she had seen caught in the bird nets along the Stiffborough shore. “Let me go,” she cried again.

“Will you come?”

“I can’t—think of Philip.”

“He won’t trouble, he has his interests in which you play no part, his friendships outside which you stand. There are plenty of things and people to console him for your absence. Miriam especially.”

He knew it was a lie; but desperate conditions demand desperate actions, and there was no time to consider others. His shot told, for he felt her shiver. Then her momentary weakness turned to the fury of a woman, wounded in her most vulnerable part.

“It’s a lie,” she burst out thickly, and struck him

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with her clenched fists. “A lie! How dare you say such things of him. He’s the soul of honour, the soul of truth. It’s a lie that he doesn’t love me, a lie! a lie! a lie!”

Sobbing, panting, stumbling over her words, she struck him on breast and shoulders, till baffled by his relentless calm, she dropped her head on his shoulder with a sob of despair as the blood hammered in her temples.

Then Sutherland spoke again, tempting her, commanding her, but she begged for mercy, and cried out for Philip.

“You can’t go back. You can’t forget. If you went back what would it be? Think of the misery it means. No, Anne, come with me, let me wipe out the past; let me make you a new life, shew you what love can be.”

“No—no! Let things stay as they are, we have been so happy. Why can’t we go on being happy.”

“How can we after this?”

“I don’t know,” she answered weakly.

“I’ve wanted you so cruelly; you surely can’t send me away alone—Anne.”

She broke into violent sobbing at that, and he having gained a point continued:

“I want to make you happy; to give you all the things you have missed in life. If you have been happy I should have kept silence. How could I when I loved you and saw you fretting against your existence. After all what has marriage been to you but a galling yoke? What have you found in it? Companionship? Understanding? Sympathy? No. It has been an

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exchange of vows, elastic for the man, binding for the woman. It has been the sacrifice of your beauty, your intellect, to a dullard who prized a beautiful wife as he prized a fine beast for the show ring. Is that the life you expected? The life you have a right to? Is that what you are prepared to endure for the next thirty or forty years?" His usual fluency was returning to him at last and she looked at him with frightened eyes.

"What else is there? After all I married him, he was good to me, very good—and I loved him—once," she said.

Despair rang in her voice because the love she coveted hung near, yet she dared not grasp it!

His answer came curtly. "When love dies marriage is a crown of thorns, a prostitution, a curse."

His thoughts had flown to Milly, to his own entanglement in the marriage laws. For the second he was tempted to tell Anne the truth, to tell her how bitterly he too had suffered. But the horror of it revolted him. He loved her too dearly to lay bare the sores of his life. Besides the past was dead, there let it lie. The new life for Anne and himself should date from this moment.

"I've nothing to offer you except my love. I've been hardened by the buffeting of circumstances, but I love you none the less tenderly, and my love shall atone for the things I lack; for the things you sacrifice by coming to me. For you are coming, Anne. We can't live apart, and if you come to me no shadow shall darken your life; my love shall always be over you to protect you; my life shall be devoted to making

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yours happy. Come to me and learn what it is to be loved as I love you. Ah, darling, why should we let a paltry law stand between us and the greatest thing in the world?"

He drew her to him, kissed her, and she shivered as a little sound, half moan, half laugh, escaped her.

"Tell me that you love me. Let me hear you say it, Anne, I have waited for it so long."

"I have always loved you," she whispered, and hid her face against his breast.

"Darling, tell me how much you love me. Do you love me as I love you; wholly, desperately, entirely?"

With a sudden cry of fear she freed herself from him and flung herself face downwards on the sofa. His words were as some grisly horror, confronting her with mocking scorn. Philip had not come to her rescue this time, but her own words spoken to him on that October evening had come instead. Alarmed at her attitude and the violence of her sobs Martin leant over her tenderly.

"Leave me alone," she cried. "Leave me, for God's sake, leave me and I'll go back home; I'll go back to Philip."

What countless memories those words evoked! The episode in her room flashed through her mind—her fears, her craving for love, her questions to Philip, and his answer, loyal, simple, honest, "I should wait for you Even if you left off loving me and loved somebody else, it wouldn't make any difference to my love for you."

Beyond that, her thoughts flew to all she must

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sacrifice, all she must renounce if she took this other love. She would be an outcast in the eyes of the world! And the memory of the “social ostracism” that Edith Stewart had faced swept over Anne. Shame, the scorn of her fellows, loss of caste, the contempt of her friends, these would be the price of the love which Sutherland offered her.

His voice cut across her torturing thoughts.

“What is it, darling? Do you doubt my love? Do you want some further proof? What can I do to convince you?”

She kept silence. Social ostracism—the scorn of her friends—the scandal. It was unbearable. Yet she dared not speak, abashed at her cowardly submission to shibboleths at which—in the security of her position as Philip’s wife—she had often mocked! She looked up, and found Martin’s eyes fixed on her as he waited for an explanation.

“No, it’s not that—” she faltered, then hesitated, her hands wrung together in her lap, her head bent. “It’s the—shame, the—degradation of—it all,” she stammered. Silence reigned in the room for an endless time as it seemed to Anne, before Sutherland’s voice fell on the stillness.

“Is that all?” The words rang clearly. “Is that your whole reason?” he asked, then he repeated the question after a pause, during which she remained mute. “Is that your only reason?” he said slowly.

She bowed her head. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes,” her pride humbled to the dust as she realised her cowardice.

“Only that!” he spoke, half as an assertion to

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himself, half as a question to her. "Only fear of the world; of forms and ceremonies; only a cowardly respect for the tie you despise in speech, but cling to in deed. And I've wasted years building up ideals round you, imagining you cared for me, that your love would stand the test of worldly scorn—to find that my trust has been placed in a coward."

"I can't bear it, I can't bear it," she wailed, burying her face in her hands. He laughed harshly and turned to the door.

"Don't leave me, I can't let you go," she cried, starting up. "Oh, don't you understand?"

He paused and looked at her. "Perfectly," he said coldly. "You want me to stay."

"Yes, yes, I can't let you go."

She clung to his arm in a desperate effort to keep him.

"You can't come—well and good; that is of your own choosing, and I can't share you with another man," he retorted brutally.

The crudeness of his speech staggered her, and she shrank back, imploring time to think.

"You had two years to think in."

"I didn't realise this."

"Then you were a fool."

Again she pleaded for time, for a day, "one little short day."

"No, I'm tired of waiting," he answered, and crossing the room swung on to the landing. Then he paused, his eyes devouring the forlorn figure standing in the centre of the room. If she had slain his ideals, shattered his faith, she had not destroyed his desire for her.

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Then there came to Anne as she stood alone in the big, sunny drawing-room, an overwhelming rush of recollection of her home, her daily life, her husband; and they filled her with sick revolt. She saw Philip, his goodness blotted out, his fineness marred by his limitations. She saw the blue and gold, the rose and amethyst of summer at Stiffborough blurred by the sullen storminess of winter, saddened by the wail of the sea birds, the moan of the North Sea wind. Stiffborough, the abomination of desolation as it had become to her of late. It was intolerable to contemplate another thirty or forty years of such an existence, and she pictured herself old and withered, watching youth die, beauty wane, desire perish, debarred by her own act from tasting the fruits of the love she coveted! But the other was impossible, and therefore she must be content to see life pass in the shallows of the commonplace, the marshes of discontent, because she was afraid of so poor a thing as the world's scorn!

For an instant the gates of paradise had opened before her when she lay in Martin's arms, but she had been held back. By what? Trivialities—the fripperies of life—. The gates she had not dared pass through were closing and there would be no re-opening. Twice before Sutherland had passed out of her life; twice before she had tasted the bitterness his departure entailed. Twice before he had returned, but this time there would be no returning. This was the end.

She was seized with the desire to laugh at this huge trag-i-comedy in which she found herself involved.

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This hellish joke perpetrated at his expense and hers, and her mouth twisted itself in the hideous semblance of a smile, though no sound came. Then Martin moved towards the stairs and his action roused her. There was still time to pass through the gates of paradise! The world and its contumely faded, the shame of her future was swept aside. The decisive moment of her life had come, and she dared not deny it, as for an instant she rose to heights of self-surrender of which she never dreamt herself capable. Her voice choked in an inarticulate cry, and she stumbled blindly towards Sutherland with outstretched, groping hands.

CHAPTER XII

PHILIP MAKES PLANS

ON the same Sunday that Anne was taking her momentous step Philip and a few other guests, Mrs. Chester among them, were sharing the hospitality of the Heathcotes. As they returned from church after the morning service, the M.F.H.'s wife hung round the door, making various excuses to delay her departure, in the hopes of securing a tête-à-tête with Miriam; but Fred Heathcote scenting danger, remained glued to his sister's side. He detested Mrs. Chester, and with infinite pleasure out-maneuvred her, as turning to him she begged him not to wait. She wished on no account to delay him, she said, but she was getting old and could no longer walk fast. Fred smiled amiably and declared himself solely anxious to suit his pace to hers. Realising the hopelessness of dislodging him from Miriam's side, Mrs. Chester dashed into the subject that dominated her mind.

"I want to talk to you about a most unpleasant matter." There she paused impressively. "I mean of course, Philip Inescourt. It's high time somebody spoke to him on the subject of his wife."

"About Anne? Surely they can manage their own affairs without other people interfering?" Miriam retorted.

"It's precisely what they can't do; and it's wrong, from the point of view of the country's welfare, that

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matters should be allowed to go on in their present condition."

Fred glanced at his sister. Her expression had hardened and she was silent as Mrs. Chester continued:

"People are saying all sorts of things, and it's becoming unpleasant. Personally I have an affection for Philip, partly for himself, partly for his mother's sake, and I want to do the best for him; to stand by him loyally. But no amount of loyalty will prevent others from saying what they please about him. They are suggesting he must be a fool or a knave to countenance his wife's behaviour. It's not at all a nice thing to have in the county."

She surveyed Miriam from beneath the brim of a burnt straw hat, trimmed with sad-coloured roses and limp rosettes of black tulle. Truly Anne's likening her to "*Agamemnon*" during the moulting season was apt, for her coiffure, her thin face, with its drab-coloured hair, and her hooked nose. The resemblance to "*Agamemnon*" was increased at the present moment by the brightness of her eyes, and the forward thrust of her head on its scraggy neck.

"I can't see that Philip's affairs concern the county," the younger woman answered, as her lips fell in an ominous line. Mrs. Chester shot her a quick look—Miriam had a way of holding her own which she disliked.

"Nonsense, my dear; Stiffborough is one of the biggest houses round here, and the Inescourts are one of the oldest families, so, of course, what they say and do carries weight in the neighbourhood. I consider it of great importance that matters be put straight at

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once. Personally, I'm sorry for Philip—very sorry indeed, and I know he's only a fool, not a knave as people are so ready to say. Yes, he's certainly a fool," she added decisively.

"Poor Phil," Fred interposed.

"But what else is he?" Mrs. Chester turned to him sharply.

"One of the truest pals, one of the finest men, one of the best sportsmen going."

She snorted, and said she supposed Fred considered Philip's sporting qualifications an excuse for all faults.

"It isn't a bad recommendation, is it?" He glanced at her, a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "We can't all be brilliant you see, besides clever people have an abominable knack of reducing one to a state of pulpish imbecility, so I find the Philips of this world most welcome." He met Mrs. Chester's defiant look calmly. She was often uncertain how much he was in earnest, how much he mocked; and the doubt made her ill at ease.

"Why is Phil a fool?" he asked, as she offered no reply.

"Because he is."

"I think him so, because I think him so"—a truly feminine argument."

Miriam's mouth twitched; she was pleased at the rebuke, yet felt it her duty to suppress the young man. "The Bar is making you cheeky, Fred," she said reproachfully, though her eyes belied the reproof of her words.

"I merely quote a well-known authority—classical—and generally considered accurate."

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The retort was unanswerable and Mrs. Chester lost patience. Each step brought them nearer home without having advanced her cause.

"To return to Philip," she said sternly, "it's time somebody took him in hand. It's disgraceful the way he lets Lady Inescourt run about with that newspaper man."

"I should like to see Sutherland's face if he heard himself called 'that newspaper man!' Do you know that he is supposed to be one of the rising journalists of the day; he goes everywhere, and knows everybody?"

Mrs. Chester tossed her head. Her knowledge of journalism was limited, but she held pronounced views on the "right people to know," and receive in the county. Certainly, the little unshaven man who scribbled for the local paper would not have gained admission to her own severely furnished drawing-room. Sutherland she placed in the same category: "A newspaper man was a newspaper man," she remarked, then waxing indignant, wondered what society was coming to if such people were received? Realising a moment later, however, that she had been led away from her subject she turned on Fred. "You should speak to Philip; he's been like a brother to you and Miriam all your lives."

"I've no doubt your suggestion implies an immense admiration for my powers and tact; still, it's a job I hardly feel qualified to undertake. Phil's temper is of the best, but Anne is a subject on which I should not venture to tackle him."

"Nonsense! Who could speak with more authority

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than yourself, both as a friend and a lawyer."

"I shall speak as neither, Mrs. Chester, because I've a prejudice against interfering in other people's affairs."

"So have I, a great objection; but there are times and seasons when it becomes imperative, and this is one of them." She turned to Miriam, with a persuasive smile, "I'm sure, my dear, you agree with me that somebody should speak."

Miriam shook her head. What right had she, or anybody else, to sow dissensions between husband and wife by raising suspicions which in all probability had no foundation in fact; her eyes glittered angrily as she looked at her guest.

"I hope nobody will attempt such an unjustifiable thing, in this house," she said coldly, and Mrs. Chester closed her sunshade with a vicious snap as they reached the front door.

"You needn't think I shall take upon myself to speak if that's what you mean. Still, I confess it passes my comprehension that a man's most intimate friends should put their own ease and comfort before his welfare." With which parting shot she marched off defiantly to the sanctuary of her bedroom.

As Miriam looked at her brother, her face clouded. "Was I right?" she said.

"Of course. What earthly good can you or I do in the matter? We should only enrage Phil, and if he's happy, why, in the name of fortune, should we disturb him?"

Miriam sighed as she moved about the drawing-room, her mind full of Mrs. Chester's words, because

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they were as a whip-lash flicked across her peace.

"I wish I knew what to do for the best," she said, "for although I denied all knowledge of possible trouble between Phil and Anne, I'm not happy about them." Her face was troubled as she turned to her brother. Then she continued with an effort: "I was at Stiffborough once when Sutherland arrived; I shall never forget Anne's expression as he came in—her excitement—she seemed beside herself almost; it was horrible. I think for the moment she forgot I was there. I never thought there was anything serious in it till then; it had struck me as a foolish, exaggerated friendship, but she is a foolish, unbalanced woman, and I had discounted Mrs. Chester's remarks for that reason. Afterwards I tried hard to forget what I had seen. I tried to think it was fancy, but it wasn't. And now people are chattering, and Phil in his dear innocence sees nothing, knows nothing, and all the while they are brutal about him, they are ready to accuse him of being '*le mari complaisant*.' He, so straight and honourable! It's wicked."

Her voice quivered and Fred stared silently out of the window, his heart was more sore for his sister than for Philip, though he could find no words of help or comfort, and he was glad when he heard her leave the room.

Late on that same afternoon of peaceful sunshine, Miriam and Philip having wandered round the farm, paused by a gateway. The day was perfect; a soft breeze swept up from the sea and rippled the surface of the standing crops into pliant waves, as field after field of green, gold, and pale saffron stretched away

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to the purple of the Stiffborough marshes and the hazy blueness where sea and sky blended in a faintly defined horizon. An intense stillness pervaded the scene; as Philip, content, and appreciative, gazed seawards, whilst Miriam watched him in silence, questioning whether indeed Anne could have withdrawn her love from him and given it to one, who, though quick to adapt himself to a new environment, yet in many things betrayed his social short-comings? To Miriam's fastidious mind, Sutherland's manner lacked the assurance of a man living in his natural sphere. His sugared speeches grated on her, his cynicism was cheap in quality, and she knew that he lived with his tongue in his cheek, mocking at the very people whom he flattered most. For that reason alone, if for no other, she would have shunned and disliked him. To herself, proud, exclusive, and perhaps a trifle narrow in her outlook, the man's attraction for Anne remained a mystery. Many times during the past year she had rebuked herself when tempted to resent Anne's intimacy with him—after all, must a woman be debarred from the friendship of all men because she was married? It was an unjust rule to establish. Besides, Anne was woman of the world enough to behave herself; coward enough to risk no lessening of her social standing by any silly escapade. These thoughts flitted uneasily through her mind as she leant over the gate and studied Philip. She saw the rather heavy, square jaw, the firm yet tender lines of the mouth under its fair moustache, the hands strong and capable; hands that could break such a man as Sutherland. He was not likely to be tricked and it would go hard with the person who tricked

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him. To the man he would show no mercy. To the woman he might show too much. If Anne proved false, what would he do? She shrank from the very thought of such a contingency and remembered countless words and unconscious signs by which he had betrayed to her watchful eyes his absorption in his wife. Then he broke upon her meditations and uneasy conjectures.

"Awfully jolly and peaceful, isn't it?" he said, after contemplating the mongrel fox terrier. "Puffins," who sat at his mistress's feet, his tongue lolling from his mouth, as with one ear cocked, the other drooping, he snapped flies. "Fancy preferring London when one's got this." Philip swung his stick towards the wide prospect.

"I can't understand it either. And yet there are people who call it an ugly country." She paused, and added with a smile, "I suppose tradition and possession are the chief factors in binding one to places. You and I love this corner of the world because it belongs to us and we belong to it; because generations of our ancestors have lived and died here, until we look upon ourselves as part and parcel of its entity."

He made no reply for a moment, he needed time to understand her remark, then he agreed—meditatively.

"Probably that's it. Anyhow it's ripping to know it's one's home," he added, and felt himself on less abstract ground. Then he added: "Sutherland wrote a topping description of it all, and sent it to a magazine. Everybody was full of it. He certainly did do it awfully well, and one seemed to see the places so

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clearly, though he called them by fancy names."

His tone was regretful, and she turned to him with a more enquiring glance than she was conscious of.

He answered her unspoken question. "I was wishing I could write like that, because Anne sets such store by those things. Besides, it must be ripping to be able to put down just what you see; that's to say, if you see it right." He hovered over the final words. "Seeing them right is what Anne calls 'the artistic sense,' and I can't grapple with it somehow. I always see things the wrong colour I believe—she says I do."

Miriam gazed into the distance. She wondered how much Anne knew of things artistic, how much she affected for the purpose of impressing Philip with her knowledge? He resumed the topic of art in that faintly puzzled way of his when discussing matters foreign to his mind.

"Mrs. Chester said at lunch that artistic talk was rubbish, and that shadows were never purple or blue, everybody knew they were black. She'd been taught that by her governess when she learnt drawing. I didn't want to contradict her, but Anne tells me shadows are all sorts of colours. As she's a real artist she ought to know, so I told old mother Chester what she said."

"What was her answer?"

"Snorted up and down that long nose of hers like an enraged elephant."

Miriam laughed and silence fell between them for a few minutes. She was still looking across the fields when her companion startled her with a fresh subject.

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"Do you know anybody who'd care to buy 'Bustard,' somebody who'd be good to him?"

"'Bustard!' What on earth do you want to sell him for?" she asked, knowing he was the most treasured horse in Philip's limited stable.

I'm going to sell all the horses this year." He spoke with an effort. It was the first time he had brought himself to tell anybody of his determination and as she looked at him he grew restless. Turning his back on the landscape, he leant against the gate.

"This winter I'm not going to 'punch skins over fences' as Tim O'Brien calls it."

Fear possessed Miriam. Had there been a crash? Was there really trouble between Philip and Anne? She stared at him and her face grew pale; his was strangely impassive.

"Why?" she asked sharply.

He hesitated, and taking his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes, then began to pass a stiff blade of grass through the stem.

"I've been thinking an awful lot about Anne and her life here, and it's struck me I've been a bit of a brute to keep her at home all these winters. She hates the place—perhaps, as you say, because she hasn't been born and bred on it. She hates the people round here, excepting you, worse and worse every year. I hoped a little time ago, she was getting to like it, but something changed all that suddenly; I don't know why, and now there doesn't seem any chance of matters getting better. Then, of course, she does feel the cold most awfully. It's beastly cold here, really; only you and I are so used to it. Besides, we hunt, so that

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keeps us warmed up. But from the point of view of a woman who doesn't hunt, and doesn't shoot or do anything of that sort, it must be dog-dull work. So I thought it would be playing the game if I took her abroad this winter. Don't you think it's a topping plan? Give her a real good change. She shall choose where we go and what we do, and all that sort of thing. That would be fair I think. You see, if the horses sell well—and they ought to, for they're clinkers, much too good for this country—then there'd be a nice bit of 'ready' to spend and she could have a ripping time. She deserves it, too, poor little girl, after all the dull winters she's spent here while I've been enjoying myself hunting and shooting."

Miriam made no reply. She kept her head turned from him, her eyes rivetted on the distance, but her lips quivered while she listened, and her fingers grasped the top bar of the gate tightly, and "Puffins" wondered at his mistress's troubled air.

"Don't you think it's a good plan, Mim?" Philip asked, as he threw away the blade of grass and screwed his pipe together again.

"Yes, dear Phil, it's excellent—for Anne," she said gently. "It's—it's uncommonly good of you," she added, turning to him with a smile.

Gallantly though he had hidden the effort, she appreciated to the full what his decision was costing him. The selling of his horses she dared not consider at present, moved as she was at his devotion to the woman who requited him so ill. "It's splendid of you, and I hope Anne realises it." Her voice hardened unconsciously as she spoke of his wife.

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"Oh, she doesn't know anything about it yet; I thought I'd keep it as a surprise for her when she gets home on Wednesday. A 'bonne bouche,' isn't that the word?" He paused, sucking for a moment at his empty pipe, then he added, with a rueful laugh, "I must try and pick up some froggy lingo, I suppose, as Anne's sure to want to go to Paris—all women do—and she'd hate one's looking too big a fool, not being able to talk any language but one's own." He looked at her whimsically. "Fancy me in Paris: Lord, how comic."

Miriam laughed unsteadily. The thought of Philip abroad was strangely incongruous, Philip who knew no language but his own, and that in a primitive manner! Philip, the typical John Bull, as Sutherland was dubbing him at that very moment in the Rosendales' drawing-room. But though she laughed, the distance was blurred to her vision, and bending down, she patted "Puffins" and surreptitiously passed the tips of her fingers over her eyes before she spoke again.

"I should like to see you there, Phil. If only father could be persuaded to follow your example we might join you. What fun it would be!"

"Oh, I say, do you think there'd be any possibility of it? It would be top hole if you came too, somebody for me to talk to," he exclaimed, with boyish eagerness. But Miriam shook her head sadly.

"I'm afraid there isn't the ghost of a chance really; father is as hard to move as a barnacle on a rock; but it's fun to build castles in the air sometimes."

Philip looked at her, and his face grew serious

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again. With a hitch of his broad shoulders, he said, "Seems to me we men are all a bit selfish and barnaclly in that way."

Then, as they moved away from the gate, he added joyfully, "It'll be jolly to tell Anne the plans on Wednesday when she gets back, won't it?" and Miriam smiled assent while "Puffins," galloping ahead, barked frenziedly.

CHAPTER XIII

ANNE'S LETTER

WHAT the devil do you want, eh?" Agamemnon's raucous tones greeted Miriam as she opened the gun room door at Stiffborough on the following Thursday.

For a moment she paused on the threshold, dazzled by the brightness of the westering sun that illumined the litter of fishing tackle, whip-racks and gun cases with which Philip loved to surround himself. Anne seldom frequented this apartment. She objected to its untidiness, its smell of tobacco, and the strident tones of the old parrot, whose cage filled the bow-window, offended her ears. But Philip was at his ease here; he was free to enter with mud-encrusted boots, to lounge as indolently as he chose, to smoke innumerable pipes and cigars. Here alone, out of all the rooms in his home, he reigned supreme. Miriam thought of these things as she stood, her fingers on the handle of the door, an amused smile on her lips called forth by Benson's announcement that her ladyship had not returned as expected on the previous day. It was typical of Anne to change her plans without any warning, and the news had been by no means unwelcome, although Miriam had ridden over with the express purpose of seeing Lady Inescourt. But the prospect of a tête-à-tête with Philip was the more pleasant for its unpremeditation.

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Her ride had filled her with delight, for she had passed through a fairyland of midsummer loveliness. Her eyes had rested appreciatively on the incurved coast-line, and the flat creek-intersected marsh, and her heart had been gay as she rode down the familiar lanes. The exhilaration of the day had beguiled her into a childish frivolity of mood which she sought to check by the reminder that she was past her youth, and that middle-aged sobriety should by rights claim her for its own. But as she stood in the doorway even the ruthless brilliancy of the sunlight failed to disclose traces of the passing years on the smooth skin of her face, or in the generous curves of her lips parted in their happy smile.

Philip had apparently failed to hear her arrival, for he still remained seated at the writing table, his back towards her, and she supposed him absorbed in some intricate farm account, so she waited, as Agamemnon swung, head downwards, from the top of his cage and surveyed her with his bright malignant eyes. Suddenly the silence struck her unpleasantly and she made a movement, hoping to attract her host's attention; but he remained bent forward as though looking over some papers; and the rigidity of his attitude filled her with vague alarm.

A laugh at her own fears broke the stillness: "Well, Phil, so Anne's played you false after all," she said.

He started, turned his head and confronted her with a dazed air. She saw that his face was haggard, and he stared at her unseeingly. He had stared just as unseeingly for the past half hour at Agamemnon's antics.

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"What is it?" Miriam asked breathlessly.

"Who told you?" He ran his words together like a drunken man, then repeated them with a painful effort. "Who—told—you?" His eyes were fixed on hers, there was a strange slackness about his mouth. The swish of Miriam's habit against her riding boots roused him. He recognised her then, thinking in a bewildered fashion that he had been wanting her. And yet—was that it? No, there was something else. What on earth was it?

His eyes grew less vacant, and, as he swung the writing-chair round, his hands clutched its arms because he was horribly giddy.

"Who told you? Who said she wasn't coming back?" he asked defiantly. "Not coming—" He broke off abruptly. The woman gasped, then steadied herself against the handle of the door, as he said:

"She's gone—gone with Sutherland." His tone was dully monotonous, and Miriam watched him with a sense of horror that deprived her of movement. Then she went to him, and dropping on her knees, laid her hands on the cold lifeless ones, pressing her fingers firmly on his as she looked up in his face.

"My poor Phil," she said gently. He stared fixedly over her head at the opposite wall. His silence, the greyness of his face, frightened her, as she felt his fingers coldly passive under hers.

"Tell me about it," she said. "Tell me, dear Phil, tell me." Her hands pressed on his. "When did you hear?" she said, seeking to rouse him from his lethargy. She even shook his arms as she repeated her question. At last a faint light of comprehension dawned on his face.

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"Long ago—when Benson brought the second post—yes—the second post and her letter—" His eyes turned to some sheets of foreign paper lying on the table. "Her letter—when—I expected her." He leant back in his chair striving to regain his self-control, to concentrate his thoughts, and bring order out of the chaos within him.

A strange numbness possessed him, an impotence of movement or expression, though he was conscious of Miriam's hands gripping his. Through that numbing coldness he felt their warmth and throbbing pulses, yet he shivered, for the cold had paralysed him, mentally and physically. He remembered the same sensation after a bad fall. Then, as now, he had emerged from the night of unconsciousness to a blurred recognition of things and people. The strong man's horror of helplessness gripped him, as Miriam's face, white with alarm, grew indistinct, and life seemed to be sliding from him. He seized her hands to save himself—seized them in an agony of dread, and with a desperate effort staggered to his feet.

"I—I shall be all right in a minute—it's nothing—nothing," he muttered.

She led him gently to the window.

What a fearful noise the bees made in the bed of mignonette outside! What infernally shrill voices the swallows had as they flew past. He had never noticed these things before. A moment ago he had heard through a blanket, seen through a mist; now the intensity and sharpness of sounds hurt him, the brightness of light dazzled him. It struck him as so odd that he wanted to call her attention to it, to ask if she also

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felt like that. Then the air revived him, the noises faded, the room cleared itself, and Miriam, standing near him, became a tangible creature of flesh and blood. Sanity had returned, and master, of himself, he released her hands to which he had clung, and leaning against the window, pressed his forehead on the cold glass.

“Is it true?” he asked; and his eyes met hers with a hungry appeal. Perhaps he had fallen asleep and dreamt this dream of horror?

She was silent; then, as his glance wandered round the room it fell on the sheets of foreign writing-paper that lay on the table.

He knew it was not a dream to be dispelled by returning consciousness. The letter existed. He was awake, horribly, undeniably awake.

“I suppose it’s true—all she says. That she doesn’t care for me—that she wasn’t happy here. It’s dreadful to think of, that; when I imagined she was happy and contented:”

He walked a trifle unsteadily towards the table, gathered the letter together and stared at it in silence. Then he dashed it from him, and the pages fluttered to the ground like a host of white moths.

“Curse him, the damned cur. Curse him and his infernal lies. Curse him for coming here and stealing her from me. Think of her stolen by a damned black-guard like that! Oh! Christ, it’s horrible!”

He flung himself into the chair and buried his face in his arms. Miriam was thankful for the outburst, for the animal had asserted itself within him, and herein lay salvation; but she stood aside, for there

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were no words in which to console him, and with her fingers tightly interlaced, she watched him till he raised his head, and turned to her with a torrent of questions whose answers he did not wait to hear.

"Am I to blame? Is it my fault for being a blind fool? Ought I to have seen what the man was? Ought I to have refused to have him here? Tell me, Mim? Tell me? She was so happy when he came; and I was no companion for her. We had nothing in common, really, you know; and they had so much. What could I do? I wanted her to be happy; that was the chief thing I cared for, that I tried for all day and every day—to make her happy. I did as I thought best for her; and now this has happened. Surely a man oughn't to be punished when he's doing his best. Why must this devilish thing happen? I thought I was right in the way I behaved; I never refused her anything except the motor, and that was because I couldn't send away poor old Jeffreys when he was too old to get another place. I couldn't, could I?" He turned more fully towards her, a perplexed frown creasing his forehead. "After all, why should one suspect a fellow just because he isn't a sportsman? I didn't like him at first, but I thought it was just because he was an artistic chap and hated shooting and hunting; so I tried awfully hard to see what was best in him for Anne's sake. Was that wrong?"

This time he paused and waited for an answer. She shook her head. "You've nothing to reproach yourself with. How could you know what he was? Decent people don't suspect their fellows of being black-

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guards; besides, they both played their game too well to allow any suspicion of harm to arise."

Philip missed the bitterness of her words and the coupling of Anne's name with Sutherland's in the deceit practised. His mind had reverted to the letter, and he gathered up the scattered sheets. In the silence she heard the rustle of the thin paper as he sorted the pages with painful precision, and placed them in their proper order. Then he turned towards her.

"Read it," he said peremptorily.

Repugnance filled her at the thought of seeing a communication intended for his eye alone; besides, when he grew calmer, he might regret his present desire, so she shook her head, pushing his hand aside.

"Not now, dear, another time," she said gently.

But he insisted with irritable petulance. "No, no, read it now. After all, you are her friend as much as mine, and if you are to help us both, you must know everything—you must see how cruelly she has suffered, how awfully hard she's fought, poor little thing, before she gave way to this abominable temptation."

The last words were added as for the first time he detected the hardening of Miriam's face. Since he would accept no refusal she took the letter reluctantly, take leave of her husband.

and seating herself on the broad window ledge, read the effusion in which Lady Inescourt had seen fit to

"Dear Phil," it ran, "Don't expect me on Wednesday. I am not coming home then, or indeed, at all. I am in Paris, on my way to Austria with Martin

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Sutherland, and I am writing to explain matters to you, but it's very hard to express myself and I wish you to believe that what has occurred causes me fully as much pain as it will, I fear, afford you. If, therefore, I seem hard at times, make allowances for me, I am only a woman, desperately in love with a man, yet bound to a husband who has been more good, more patient towards my shortcomings than any other human being could ever have been.

“I have left you because I love Martin, and I know that he—and he alone—can give me the happiness I have vainly sought with you. Please do not think for a moment that this action is an unpremeditated one, or the result of a sudden fancy. It is not. A year and a half ago, he told me of his love, one winter’s evening in the hall of Stiffborough; but I was surprised and frightened because he had always been to me a friend, a true, loyal friend, and I had thought my own feelings for him were also those of friendship. Now I see that it’s an impossible relation between a man and woman. When he spoke to me that time, I determined to expose neither him nor myself to further dangers, so I resolved not to see him again. Do you remember that winter, I wonder? I shall never forget it, nor the misery I endured in fighting my love. I tried to forget him; he tried to forget me, and went to America. But, ‘l’absence ni le temps ne sont rien quand on aime,’ alas! and though I struggled to be nice to you, to take an interest in your farming, in your neighbours and your friends, I failed. Night and day it was one long misery; and the more I sought to re-kindle my old love for you,

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the colder it seemed to grow; ah, Phil, it was awful: I struggled so hard against my love for him, but it was impossible to live without him. The agony of that winter you will never be able to understand; you who have never known temptation; you who have neither temperament, emotions nor sensitiveness. You, who are content with a dull existence how can you understand the longings of the artist soul for things better and fairer, for a life so different in all ways from that round of stagnant quiet at Stiffborough. I am not blaming you, Phil, but I am trying to explain how it all came about, what an agglomeration of circumstances worked towards this inevitable climax.

“Never blame Martin for anything that has happened, for he is free of all guilt, and I alone am blameworthy for remaining blind so long and for possessing the temperament which I do possess. To you he has been loyal beyond words, for he has always considered you his friend, and falseness is a thing abhorrent to his nature. He breathed no word of love to me for nearly two years, no word of reproach to me, of anger against you for standing between us as you so unconsciously did.

“When he came back from that long trip to America, we both fancied ourselves sufficiently cured to meet without danger; but we were wrong. Ever since that time this climax has drawn nearer and nearer without pause. I can, however, lay my hand on my heart and assure you in all truth and honour that I have been, throughout, your loyal wife in deed if not in thought. Your honour has been safe in my

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hands, but now I am free to go my own way, free to lead my own life, which I have now chosen.

“Our marriage was a mistake, Phil; I realised it only too soon, when I saw how little we had in common; but still I tried to blind myself to the fact, to create a happiness which did not exist. I failed, and now we must both pay the penalty.

“I have been unworthy of your love, perhaps; unmindful, at times, of your goodness to me. Possibly your very goodness and unselfishness made me restless, made me long for something less wholly kind and good, for somebody who would not put me on a pedestal and worship me. It would have been better for both of us if you had seen my faults and reproved me for them. But why repine when it’s too late? Why waste time saying ‘if’ and ‘but?’ The mischief is done, and perhaps, even had you seen me in a less rosy light, this would have happened, since Martin and I were evidently destined for one another from the beginning of all time. The world holds only one man for me—as it holds only one woman for him—and therefore I leave you, and, taking my life in my hand, am setting forth into the great unknown with him.

“You and your world will, no doubt, consider us guilty of an unpardonable offence against its social laws. After all, what are they, those social laws? Mere man-made ordinances against which, whoever has any individuality must of necessity revolt sooner or later. Nature stands above such things, and nature intended me for Martin; so, in giving myself to him, I do not consider myself guilty of sin, since

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I am only asserting myself, accepting at last my birthright of individualism and obeying the law of affinity which it is wrong to resist. Some day when you are calmer, you will understand all I feel and all I have said.

"Divorce me as soon as you can, Phil; because I long to feel myself legally bound to Martin. I lack the courage to face some things, even at the price of the love I have so long coveted. It is horrible to me to live outside the law, but I have no choice at present. Give me my freedom quickly, you, who have always been so good to me; you, who have never refused me the least thing I have asked."

"Freedom will, I think, be welcome to you, too, Phil; and when you have forgotten the horror we shall both endure in dragging our names before the public gaze you will seek another and a better wife. You will not seek far, nor find your courtship arduous, and she will suit you better than I have ever done. I shall wish you joy from the bottom of my heart; for I shall always feel the greatest respect and affection for you; and, if you will, I should like to keep your friendship, even though we failed to find happiness as husband and wife. This perhaps seems a hard thing to ask, and I have no right to do so after all I am making you suffer. Believe me, Phil, I, too, am suffering, even in my happiness, and your forgiveness would mean much, oh! so much to Anne."

Miriam read the letter through without moving. Then she stared out of the window, her eyes hard, her mouth set. Was it only an hour ago that she had ridden through the undulating land? Only an hour ago that

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life had seemed sweet and excellent? What an irony of fate that she should be plunged from the exhilaration of a gay mood into the midst of this hideous tragedy.

Bitter thoughts thronged her brain against the woman who could wound like this. Contempt filled her for these vapourings of a vain, selfish soul which stared at her from the paper in her hand. She felt that Anne had enjoyed writing this letter, had revelled in this turning out of her emotions, in rounded sentences and priggish platitudes. The whole thing was nauseous, and wrath burnt within Miriam at the scarcely veiled innuendo concerning herself which she had read with disgust, and which Philip, in his misery, had evidently failed to understand. She looked at him as he sat at the table; then she rose and crossed the room, her anger melting to sympathy, as she laid her hand softly on his shoulder.

"My poor Phil," she said gently. But he neither moved nor spoke, and fearful lest he should relapse into his former stony silence, she asked him what course he intended to pursue.

"There's nothing to do but wait," he answered sadly.

She looked at him; then, as he gave no further reply, she spoke again: "About—about the thing she wants—the divorce?"

He shook his head. "One says 'for better, for worse' and 'till death us do part.' I don't see that one ought to change from it, do you?"

"Anne hasn't stuck to it." The enmity within her refused silence; and Philip looked up struck by the harshness of her tone. 210

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"But she was so awfully tempted." He hesitated, conscious of the desire to explain himself more lucidly, yet at a loss for words, and his eyes met Miriam's beseechingly. "Women are different to men, they don't see things in the same light; besides you can't expect them to be as strong or as able to resist temptation, can you?"

"I don't know," she retorted curtly; "but I can't see that the code of honour is capable of two different interpretations; nor is there one law for the man and another for the woman in such cases as this."

Her words failed to reach him, however, and when he spoke again it was in pursuance of his train of thought.

"She asked me once what I should do if—if anything of this sort happened," he said, for his mind had reverted to the evening on which she had flung herself into his arms. He had not understood her outburst then; nor had he thought of it for a long time, though at the actual moment, and even for some days after its occurrence, a sense of unrest had filled him. Now he saw how much it had portended, how long this matter had troubled her; and an immense pity for all she had endured possessed him.

In Miriam, wrath burnt fiercely, for with all her fine qualities, she had much of the stringent narrowness, natural to those who, through circumstances or temperament, are spared the furnace of temptation. Then he resumed.

"Sutherland had evidently been frightening her that day, for I remember she was awfully jumpy and upset; and I told her that whatever happened, I

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should always love her and wait for her. So you see my word's pledged." He looked up and waited a reply.

"No, I don't see it," she answered curtly. "Anne asks you to release her—she wants her freedom. Give it her."

"She doesn't understand what it means. When I read her letter, I meant to do what she wanted; but now I know what I ought to do. Second thoughts are best, for you see, at the first go off there was nothing in my mind but a wish to rush off and kill the damned cur; I suppose it's the animal instinct to kill the man who has stolen what one values most in the world. But it wouldn't do a scrap of good; she'd only think him a martyr. And so I saw there was nothing to do but wait—wait, that's all; for he's the sort of brute who wouldn't marry her if he could. He'd make his infernal rot about free-love and beastliness of that kind of an excuse for not binding himself. And you see, if she was no longer my wife what would she do? There'd be nobody for her to go to. Nobody to help her; and she'd want help, wouldn't she?"

Miriam turned aside with a brusque movement. It was intolerable that he should expect her to subscribe to an arrangement where all the gain rested with the sinner. Her heart was stony against Anne. She would hear no excuses.

"How can I say what's best," she began, then paused. "It depends on the reality of their love for one another," she resumed, "it depends on how much is mere passion, which will wear itself out in a week. If they care, it would be kinder to free her." Her face

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was cold in its expression, her eyes defiant. "Don't ask my advice," she cried fiercely.

How could he expect her to decide such a question when she longed to see him free, yet felt herself guilty of disloyalty towards Anne for urging such a course. "You must decide yourself; it lies between you and your wife. Nobody else must interfere."

He flinched. Her roughly spoken words, her harshness, had unintentionally conveyed an imputation of cowardice which stung him.

"Of course, I didn't mean you to interfere; but I thought as a woman, you would see things from her point of view, and I'm not clever enough to put myself in another person's place." He laughed in a strained way. "Besides, for a moment all the stiffening had gone out of me. I was like a pricked air balloon you know—gone flat."

He took up a paper knife and turned the thing about in his hands. The humiliation of his recent weakness and her apparent rebuke gripped him so that he twisted the knife sharply till it snapped in half. Flinging the broken pieces on the table with a muttered curse, he began to pace the room, speaking in a hard toneless voice:

"I shall tell her that I mean to do nothing for six months; and if at the end of that time she is of the same mind as now, I'll do as she wishes. If not, she is free to come back; I shall be here waiting for her. Meanwhile, I'll ask her to keep it all quiet." He paused, and added rather anxiously: "Surely it must be possible to prevent people knowing if I say the doctor ordered her abroad, and I'm going to join her

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in the winter? I can go away somewhere then and nobody need know we aren't together. You see I meant to go abroad with her this winter, and had spoken to Benson about it already; and you can say I mentioned it to you, can't you?"

"I told Mrs. Chester so on Sunday evening."

Again he paused. She marvelled at his calmness, at the foresight and decision on the part of this man who half-an-hour ago had been helpless and broken. Only his hands, clenching and unclenching themselves, betrayed the tumult within him.

"It must be kept secret, because it will be easier for her, much easier, when she comes back." His face twitched as he sought to buoy himself with the thought that his wish must find fulfilment in fact. "Because she will come back? Surely you know she will? Surely?"

Miriam turned away her eyes, fearful of meeting the intensity of pain and appeal in his.

"We will hope so, dear," she said very gently.

Of what use was it to encourage false hopes? Surely no woman would dare return after such an act as this? Even Anne, with all her selfishness, her callous disregard of any suffering save her own, would not allow him to make so great a sacrifice as that? If he waited as he proposed doing; at the end of the allotted time he would only be forced to endure the same torment, and the added misery of seeing his name dragged through the filth of the divorce court. These things flitted through her brain as she stood before him avoiding his eyes. Then she realised that he waited for an answer to his last question, waited

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with a terrible eagerness in his white face, and she snatching at any means of consolation, said with a little attempt at a smile: "Of course, dear, we will hope; wait and hope."

But he was alive to every tone of her voice, every shadow on her face, and the sunlight that illumined it revealed only immense pity. He turned aside with an impatient movement, and walking to the fireplace, grasped the edge of the high, mantelpiece, "Yes, hope," he said unsteadily, as his voice broke in a sob of despair.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. CHESTER SPEAKS HER MIND

NOW Mrs. Chester, despite the sharpness of her tongue and her curiosity with regard to her fellow-creatures' affairs, possessed a heart full of good impulses. She loved both Philip Inescourt and Miriam Heathcote with a staunch love, and it was this love which prompted her to announce two months later, her intention of visiting Miriam and "having a quiet talk" with her concerning the frequency of Philip's visits to Marston. Whatever might be said concerning Lady Inescourt's health, it was nonsense she argued and invented to hide a quarrel between husband and wife. Colonel Chester offered no remark, although she plainly desired his agreement with her views.

"Well, my dear Sarah," he said, at last, because she would not be silent, "I should leave it alone. It's not your affair, and you may make trouble; peace at any price is my motto. Besides I've no doubt Lady Inescourt's health isn't good; she looks a 'peesy-weesy' creature with her tiny white face and wild eyes."

From her lord and master, therefore, Sarah Chester received no encouragement to place an uninvited finger in Philip's matrimonial pie, but nevertheless she drove to Marston that same afternoon in the "T" cart drawn by a hunter who required gentle exercise. Colonel

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Chester's horses were not fleet of foot, their master being a man of "fine proportions"—as his wife described him—so her progress was dignified and she found ample time to review her plan of campaign before the stolid old beast between the shafts shogged heavily up the Heathcote avenue. Mrs. Chester always "prepared" herself for an interview by mentally rehearsing both her own part and that of her victim's. It was unfortunate that she did not invariably receive the answers she expected, since, by their omission, she was often thrown out of her conversational stride.

She opened fire on her arrival with a non-committal remark on the weather, passing thence to the topics of the hour. Tariff Reform problems, Welsh Dis-establishment, Home Rule, the Unemployed question, Women's Suffrage, all found a fierce advocate or opposer in the M.F.H.'s wife. Whatever the subject, Mrs. Chester had a definite opinion to express and impress with sledge-hammer forcefulness, and to this flow of conversation Miriam listened, merely interposing negative or affirmative monosyllables. More than this was not expected of her. After pronouncing the local M.P. "a hopeless creature devoid of the primary instincts of a gentleman," Mrs. Chester declared that Philip ought to stand for the division at the next election.

"That's the stamp of man they want. A man they know and respect; a man who has their interests at heart, and who will vote solidly for his party without all that sitting on the fence which this wretched Mr. Whiting goes in for."

Miriam disagreed. Philip would prove a sorry

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orator, she feared, since in ordinary conversation he frequently failed to find the word he needed. But her guest did not hold with her, and adduced a variety of reasons in favour of her plan. However, she was not particularly ardent on this point, since it had all merely been the cavalry screen that masked her main attack.

"Talking of Philip reminds me that I have heard a good many things lately, which make me unhappy about him."

Miriam looked up and met the piercing glance suggestive of Agamemnon. However, she managed to answer, indifferently enough: "What is the matter with him?"

"You ought to know, my dear, considering he is here morning, noon and night."

Miss Heathcote agreed that Philip often came to see them now Anne was absent.

"It's time she returned home. I've no patience with women who neglect their homes and their duties for the sake of gadding about the Continent and amusing themselves," Mrs. Chester retorted.

"But Anne is so seedy at present and the doctors won't hear of her coming back."

"Fudge!"

"But indeed it is so; she has to remain abroad all the winter, so Philip tells me."

It was not the first time that Miriam had boldly lied concerning affairs at Stiffborough, though she despised herself for the aptitude she was developing in reeling off strings of falsehoods. Mrs. Chester plainly disbelieved her, and was equally plainly determined to gather the information she sought.

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“Something is the matter with Philip.” The frontal attack on Anne having proved abortive, Mrs. Chester altered her plan of battle.

“Nothing that I know of.”

“That’s odd considering everybody is talking of the change in him.”

“Are they? I can’t say I see any.” She flinched at her lie and thought of Philip’s set face and the lines which were tracing themselves upon it;—thought, too, of the absence of his cheerful laugh and rather heavy jests. “I hear very little gossip here, fortunately,” she remarked, after a short silence.

“None so deaf as those who won’t hear, eh, Miriam?”—this with a would-be roguish tilt of her head, crowned by the same old burnt-straw hat with its sad coloured roses; sadder than ever after a year’s wear.

“Perhaps, I haven’t much time, or, as you say, much inclination for gossip; I hate hearing my friends discussed ill-naturedly, and the gossip is always ill-natured.”

“That’s silly. There’s a great difference between gossip and scandal. Scandal I detest, but gossip is a harmless discussion of what is happening.”

“More often of what isn’t happening.” There was the tartness of exasperation, in the answer; and Mrs. Chester temporised for a moment.

“Oh, well, I don’t say that there isn’t a little to you about. He looks ill and wretched, and I even exaggeration and unnecessary foolishness in some of the tittle-tattle which one hears; but, in the present instance, Philip’s appearance gives considerable colour

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to the idea that all isn't running smoothly at home. Come now, Miriam, you know more than you are willing to confess, and I think as I am such an old friend of Philip's family that you ought to tell me what has really happened, for I am as secret as the grave. Whatever is told me never goes any further, as you well know."

But Miriam was apparently absorbed in the white linen on her knee, as she ran her thumb-nail with considerable energy along the hem she was turning down. "There's nothing to tell that I know of," she said slowly, after pressing down the hem and pulling the material straight, she held her work at arm's length to satisfy herself that it was even.

"Tut! There's never smoke without fire. You know as well as I do that the man never goes anywhere—except here; which is a thing I want to speak to you about. He looks ill and wretched, and I even hear a rumor that he is going to sell his horses. Is that true, or are you equally ignorant on that point also?" There was a note of malice in her question.

"Oh, no, he talked all that over with me long ago; he wants to sell the horses before he goes abroad to join Anne."

Here was an unexpected fence, and Mrs. Chester was checked. Should she pursue the question of Philip's going abroad or read her hostess the lesson of caution with regard to his visits to Marston? She decided to continue her attack on Philip's matrimonial affairs; so she asked where the Inescourts intended to spend the winter?

"Algiers, I believe, or wherever the doctors order her to be."

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"Doctors are obliging people to fanciful women as a rule. I've no doubt she will manage to get sent where there's plenty of gaiety." As Miriam seemed impervious to her remark, she added, "By the way, where is she now?"

"In the Tyrol last time I heard."

"How interesting! Then we shall probably meet, for I think of taking the Master there after the Homburg course."

The cotton with which Miriam was in the act of threading a needle missed its mark widely. "I didn't know you were going abroad," she said quickly.

"George's temper has been so trying with these continual attacks of gout that he must do something to get right. So I have decided to go to Homburg first and then on to Tyrol, so tell me where Lady Inescourt is to be found, for she would know which hotels are the best.

"She's wandering from place to place—never anywhere for long at a time, I fancy; but she's a bad correspondent." The needle required a considerable amount of care in threading to judge by the close attention Miriam bestowed on it.

"Oh, by the way, is it very crowded out there? I hate a crowd."

Hastily her hostess pronounced the crowds insufferable—spoiling the whole continent, but more especially Tyrol, by their presence.

"What a nuisance; I hate being jostled and mixed up with a lot of tourists; by whom foreigners always insist on judging us."

Mrs. Chester herself was the typical "Anglaise en

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"voyage," ultra-British and aggressively Protestant the moment she set foot in Catholic country. But the information, so hurriedly evolved in Miss Heathcote's brain, concerning the thronging of the neighbourhood under discussion, proved a successful counter-stroke to her attack, and Miriam followed it up by suggesting a variety of resorts in the hope of deterring her guest from the vicinity where she might, with the usual ill-luck attending the keeping of a secret, stumble against Anne and Sutherland. But to every suggestion Mrs. Chester presented some objection. Switzerland she would not hear of; the mountains gave her mental indigestion; Italy would not be bracing enough, Germany provided such detestably rude people. No, there was nothing but Tyrol "where" as she said, "the mountains can be kept at a respectful distance and the scenery is nicely varied."

The conversation had reached this point, when Philip, and his sister made their appearance, and scarcely were they seated by the tea-table, which had also made its entry, before Mrs. Chester announced her plans, and bombarded Philip with questions concerning Anne's impressions of the Tyrol.

A shadow crossed his face; his thoughts, like Miriam's, flying in alarm to a possible meeting. He glanced appealingly at his hostess.

"I was just telling Mrs. Chester that I advised their not trying the Tyrol. Don't you remember how crowded Anne told you it was in one of her letters?"

Eleanor, seated at Miriam's side, babbled of trifles with her usual inconsequence. "Yes, *too* crowded," she murmured vaguely.

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"But still, she found it charming, no doubt?" Mrs. Chester turned to Philip.

"Charming, I believe." He spoke with a suspicion of that grimness which had grown on him of late.

"I wonder whether we couldn't manage to meet, she and I? It would be so nice."

Miriam laughed. "Just now you wished to cast all county ties aside on your holiday."

"There's county and county; I referred to the Bishop and Mrs. Travers when I said that. Lady Inescourt would be quite different. No mothers' meeting to discuss or rescue work, eh, Philip?" She spoke in her most jocular manner.

"Those things hardly appeal to Anne," he answered. "I'm sure she would be awfully pleased if you would let her know when you are likely to be there."

Miriam admired the coolness of which he was capable in his determination to guard their secret. Eleanor, meanwhile, burbled on concerning a pony at Stiffborough.

"*Too* interesting, you know, Mim. Phil's got *such* a darling foal out of the old Mayfly mare, and the children have been *so* busy with it; it follows them everywhere like a dog; *too* nice, isn't it? No, no sugar, darling, thanks; it's *so* fattening."

"Why, you aren't afraid of getting fat surely! You're as thin as a lath." Mrs. Chester swung round in her chair with Agamemnon-like agility.

"Oh, but I am, the Inescourts run to fat *too* dreadfully, you know."

"Philip's running to seed at present," the M.F.H.'s wife retorted sharply. "What's the matter with you?"

She shot him a searching glance. He answered that

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he was quite well, then plied her with food in order to distract her attention from personalities.

"When do you intend joining your wife?" she asked abruptly, no more to be deflected from her course by food than an Atlantic liner by a shoal of porpoises. "You modern husbands are terrible, the way you allow your wives to go gadding about alone! In my younger days George never allowed me out of his sight. But then we were most domestic; neither of us had Bohemian tendencies."

"When she has made up her mind concerning our plans." He spoke quietly, and Miriam's heart ached at the words. What a terrible truth lay in them, what a momentous decision they portended!

"So your plans are vague?" the inquisitor continued. Philip agreed, and finding herself getting "no forradder," as she expressed it, she plunged into other matters, until rising to depart, she turned to Miriam. "I want a word with you before I go," she whispered; and making her excuses to the remaining guests, Miriam led Mrs. Chester into the smoking room.

"My dear, I came here on purpose to say something which I am afraid you won't like," she began. "But the fact is people are beginning to talk about—you—you and Philip." Miriam's head rose defiantly, a hard look crept into her eyes. "Of course, my dear, I know there's nothing at all in it—and I do my best to stop them. But you might give him a hint, just a quiet little hint you know that he must be more careful. You understand, don't you? Not to be here at all hours as he is." Again she paused. It was a more difficult task than she had expected. "You see, my dear, you are young and nice-

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looking, and he's married to the wrong woman, and, of course—well, one thing with another makes people talk."

"Let them. I don't care."

"Oh, but, my dear child, think of being the subject of gossip which you said yourself was always ill-natured. You wouldn't like that. Besides it spoils a girl's chances of marriage; and of course you will have to think of settling down soon. Your father is an old man, and if Fred brought a wife here what would you do?"

Miriam watched her with curious eyes. How many more daggers was she going to drive into her heart?

"You see, don't you? I only spoke for your good, and because, my dear, I am fond of you, fond of Philip, too, though I can't bear that little minx of a wife of his."

Still Miriam looked at her, and the older woman's discomfort grew under the stony stare from the gentle eyes which could light so strangely if their owner was moved. At last Miss Heathcote said coldly, "I don't care what the world says. Philip has always been my friend, and he will remain so as long as he pleases. If the neighbourhood chooses to gossip at our expense, they are welcome to do so." She hesitated, then added, less angrily: "I know you mean the warning kindly and give it because I have no mother to advise me; but I am capable of ordering my life safely and without danger either to my peace of mind or Philip's; I can guard my good name without entrenching myself behind a zareba of foolish conventions. I have nothing to be ashamed of in my friendship with Philip, nor do I fear the verdict of local chatter. If I did, it might be different."

She walked to the door and opened it without a word. Mrs. Chester took the hint.

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"Well, my dear, I have eased my conscience in saying what I have said, and the only result is that you think me an interfering old woman. To myself I am justified, as it has been done purely from affection—misplaced and unreturned perhaps." There was a suspicious break in her voice, and Miriam's face softened.

"I understand," she said quickly, and stooping, kissed the older woman's sallow cheek.

CHAPTER XV

PARADISE

MIRIAM showed no inclination to alter her mode of life to please Mrs. Chester or her neighbours, nor had she the least intention of paining Philip, and humiliating herself in her own eyes, by giving him the “little hint” suggested. She was prepared, as she had always been, to stand by her actions, and she would not alter her conduct by a hair’s breadth to gratify the country-side. Mrs. Chester saw this regretfully, and questioned what young women were coming to nowadays, to which her husband, stertorously somnolent after a heavy meal, grunted an inarticulate reply.

Had she seen into the depths of Miriam’s soul she might have gleaned consolation from the result produced by her remarks. For when the excitement of battle had died away, dejection possessed the younger woman, and despite the proud uplifting of her head, the fierce negation of things conventional, Mrs. Chester’s words rankled within her. She hated conventions, despising them with all the vigour of a wholesome mind. She would bow the knee in no such house of Rimmon as the elder lady prescribed; nevertheless, her pride was stricken at the thought that her innocent actions should be misconstrued, and evil imputed to Philip by those unfitted to judge either him or herself, and the atmosphere of ill-natured talk which Mrs. Chester had successfully conveyed, enveloped her with a sense of moral suffocation.

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To Philip, meanwhile, the weeks that followed Anne's departure had been intolerable. He wandered about his house like a restless spirit seeking an unattainable peace. He spent hours walking up and down the marsh, for the eerie sadness of the place appealed to him, attuned as it was to his condition; its summer beauty fell as balm on his soul, and although, as he had ruefully told Miriam, he never saw things the right colour, he found solace in the familiar scene. But more even than the marsh did Marston afford him comfort; for there he cast himself on Miriam's tenderness, drawing help and strength from her; laying bare his inmost thoughts, hopes and desires.

To Anne he wrote a plain, straightforward letter, making no outcry, uttering no reproach, but pitying her distress and regretting that her life had been unhappy at Stiffborough. He had hoped she was happy there, he said, but confessed that it must have been dull to live in an out-of-the-way place with a fool who was no companion to her. He told her that he would allow six months to elapse before he acted with regard to divorce, since perhaps she had not realised all that a divorce entailed. The letter ended with the words: "I once promised that I should always love you, that you would find me ready for you if you wanted to come home, so I shall wait in case you want me, and sit tight here hoping you will come back. I have a feeling you will come some day, so I am keeping everything quiet and saying that the doctors have ordered you abroad. It will make things easier when you come back, because then nobody will know that anything went wrong between us. I wish you had been happy here. I wish it more than I can say; but as you

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know, I am a bad hand at writing things. Perhaps you will understand how much I sympathise with all you went through. I am sending £300 to your account because you may need it; and I don't want you to find yourself short of money, for after all, you are still my wife."

Anne, touched by the simplicity and self-sacrificing devotion of the letter, wished to write and thank him. In her heart she longed to ask his pardon once again, and urge him not to delay their divorce, though she did not tell Martin so, fearful of clouding his happiness by any suggestion that she was less contented than himself with their position. But Sutherland forbade her writing, and urged her to return the money. This, however—displaying for once an unwonted firmness—she refused to do, saying that such an act would be needlessly cruel.

She was very happy in those days; for Sutherland as a lover fulfilled her highest ideals—ideals limited neither in quantity nor quality, since she demanded an inordinate amount of excellence both from life and her fellows, though prone to return such excellence by a Laodicean mediocrity. Clever, witty, imaginative as she had always known him to be; endowed with the quick perceptions lacking in Philip, she now learned the full depth of his devotion, and it differed widely from her husband's unquestioning worship. Philip's obtuseness had dulled for her the fineness of his love and she had almost resented his inability to find a flaw in her. For him she had belonged to the order of "things more divine than human," to Martin she represented an adorable, faulty woman.

He saw her faults, rallied her on them, and loved

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her the more for her weaknesses, even as she loved him the more for not placing her on that lonely pinnacle of perfection where poor Philip had enthroned her. She was essentially human, and demanded, not reverence or worship, but the more satisfying and earthly attributes of admiration and passion which Martin bestowed on her. So the weeks crawling slowly for Philip, flew by in unbroken ecstasy for his wife and her lover as they roamed through the land for which Martin had thirsted.

So complete was their solitude and their absorption in one another that Anne had forgotten the necessity of facing the world again. The universe seemed to hold but herself, Martin, and the simple peasants they encountered on the wooded slopes and valleys of the Austrian Tyrol; and it came as an unpleasant surprise when Sutherland first proposed returning to England.

Once or twice he had referred to the time when he must begin work again; but he had mentioned no dates, and she had put the question aside as one that would find fulfilment at some far distant period, perhaps after her divorce had enabled her to marry him. It was after a long day spent in the open country that he spoke again of future plans.

Since breakfast they had wandered through the woods and meadows, and he had created a fairy world for her, bidding her hearken for the Pipes of Pan, or watch the wood-nymphs hiding behind the red-boled fir stems. So cleverly had he conjured with words that it seemed as if the place was indeed alive with dryads, goblins, and elves who peered forth from behind the lichen-stained rocks that checked the course of the streams. Fairies danced on the aromatic fir needles, and

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Titania's henchmen flitted round Anne, as, her arms clasped round her knees, she gazed through the mysterious gloaming of the forest.

"Life is very good," she said, with a sigh of content.

"It will be good, too, when we get home," he answered.

She looked at him sharply as he lay on his back, his hat tilted over his eyes, and stared at the canopy of interlacing branches through which the light fell unevenly.

"What do you mean by home?" she asked.

"Engand—London."

"Horrid, dirty place; all noise and fogs."

"All life and energy," he amended. Then, after a pause: "This is a fairyland of gossamer and dewdrops. Both melt in the sun, both are pretty, ephemeral things to watch; but you can't touch them without destroying them."

"Everything that is worth possessing must stand the test of touch—of contact."

"What a materialistic point of view."

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "A journalist should be a materialist, shouldn't he?"

"I hate materialism," she answered, evading the question. "It's harsh and gross."

"It's useful, and that's more to the point."

"But you are a poet, not a journalist."

"A derelict poet. The hull of poetry suffered shipwreck long ago. It was salved and converted into the tramp steamer of journalism that puffs over an ocean of facts and drops a cargo of platitudes at different ports."

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"The ship has changed hands, and is going to be repaired and launched on its true career." She laughed, laid her hand on his as he pushed his hat from his face and turned to her with a regretful smile.

"The new owner will be attempting the impossible; for the old hull is incapable of answering to the breezes bellying out white sails. It can only lumber along under pressure of steam and a noisy screw."

She looked at him and laughed lightly. "'Ce que femme veut, femme peut.'"

"Not the impossible, my dear."

She sat silent for a few moments, and he watched her profile against the stem of a fir tree, and wondered how she would face his return to the old drudgery; how she would tolerate a life far removed from that to which she had been accustomed at Stiffborough? He had brought her to this peaceful wood to tell her that their holiday must end; to consult her as to their plans for the future, for there were many things to be considered, and he would do nothing without consulting her and, if possible, acceding to her wishes—provided they were reasonable. He saw that she hated the idea of England, and suspected a battle would ensue on the question of their return. Yet, dearly as he loved their "honeymoon," he began to feel a craving for work, a demand for the activity from which he had for a space sought refuge in this fairyland. As he had said, dew-drops and gossamer were transient, lovely things, and for him the contact of his fellows was a necessity now that his brain was rested and he had found the gratification of her love. It was she who broke the silence.

"Do I ask the impossible?"

"Every woman does."

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"I hate being classed in the general ruck," she objected.

"That again is typical of your sex! Every woman thinks herself an exception to some, if not to every rule; that's where she differs from men. We lack your vanity, and acknowledge ourselves in no way different from our fellows."

She made a pettish movement and declared him hateful. With mock humility he craved her pardon, and they played with nonsensical, tender words, like a couple of children, until he turned to her and said:

"The time has come to talk sense, darling."

She faced him, anxious enquiry in her eyes.

"What about?"

"The future."

"We can't do anything till I'm free," she answered, thinking of that which touched her the most nearly.

"I'm afraid I mean the immediate future, the dull question of £ s. d."

It was not the first time he had referred, a trifle uneasily, to the matter of money; but with her usual indifference to the common aspects of life, she had troubled little about it.

"Are we short of cash?" she asked.

"I'm sorry to say we are; travelling about is an expensive amusement."

"There is the sum Philip placed at the bank for me."

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply. Surely she could not intend to use her husband's money! The idea was intolerable, and lowered her in his esteem. He would steal a man's wife, but he held his money sacred! He was a man of honour!

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“Why not use it?” she asked.

“Do you mean to leave me?” He spoke curtly.

“No. Why?”

“You don’t suppose that, so long as we are together, I should allow you to touch one farthing of your husband’s money, do you?”

She was frightened; her hands clasped themselves in supplication as she looked at him with the air of a naughty child.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered.

“Have you no sense of honour,” he asked angrily, “that you can suggest such an outrageous thing?”

“I—I don’t know.” She was on the verge of tears. To herself there seemed nothing outrageous in her suggestion. Philip had given her the money, why should she not use it?

“I prefer starvation to touching a penny of his. When you see fit to leave me and go back to your husband, you can tell him that I never touched it. Whatever I have done, he shall never say I lived on his charity.”

Martin’s sense of humour was in abeyance, and Anne was moved to admiration rather than contempt or amusement. Two large tears trickled down her cheeks and fell on the hands crossed in her lap.

“I’m dreadfully sorry. Please forgive me,” she whispered.

“Women have no sense of honour,” he said.

It needed some moments for the atmosphere to clear itself after such a storm, and when he spoke again of returning home she listened, humbled for the time being by his rebukes. But the dread of quitting a land where they had been happy, a fear of being confronted by

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people of her own world, filled her; and she pleaded for a respite. Let him wait till they were married; it would not be so very long, for December would see the end of Philip's period of clemency; then they must wait for the pronouncement of the decree nisi—surely something could be arranged meanwhile?

He was mute. Marriage was a thing he had put from his thoughts, since it was impossible unless Milly died; and she was stronger than before. But of this Anne was ignorant; Milly was Sutherland's sister so far as she knew, for he had never told her the truth. Now, as they sat under the pine trees through whose stems the setting sun glowed in a ball of fire, he dared not tell her the truth because Philip was still waiting for her return, she was free to return if she wished to do so! Martin shuddered; Anne had become indispensable to him, he loved her as he had never dreamt it possible he should love any woman. His hands closed tightly on hers, he drew her to him and kissed her with sudden fierceness holding her in a grasp that crushed her.

“Darling, I must work; how else should we live?” he said at last. As he spoke he thought of this same argument adduced to Milly years gone by, and of her answer: “The Lord will provide.” Anne would no doubt vouchsafe an equally unpractical reply. She did.

“But why not work here?”

He laughed; and explained the impracticability of such a scheme. At first she rebelled, sulked, declared it needless to leave their land of Cockaigne. England was odious, cold, unsympathetic and she hated the idea of returning to it. He allowed her to vent the flood-tide of her anger in words, knowing that he must inevitably gain his point.

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"You are tired of me," she cried at last, "that's why you want to go home."

Since he would not be happy in her way, she would not make it easy for him to be so in his.

"That's foolish," he answered, "and you know it is."

"Your newspaper work is dearer to you than I am; I know you are counting the time to get back to it again."

He smiled at her childish spitefulness, and confessed that he would be glad to return to his labours. "One can't lounge life away; it's too precious and too short."

"I thought so," she burst out indignantly. "It's the old story: 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart.' I might have known how it would be."

"Silly child, why rave like this? Haven't I told you exactly why we must go back? You know there isn't a word of truth in all your talk."

She hated being laughed at, and burst into tears.

Taking her in his arms, he comforted her tenderly, and when the sun had set and her tears were dried, they wandered out of the wood and he had gained his point.

Evening was fading into the mystery of night as they walked through the open country and crossed a meadow starred with blossoms. Overhead the moon rising in a cloudless sky, sought by the cold chastity of her beams to cleanse the earth, parched with the fierce embraces of the vanished sun, while against the sky, still faintly tinted by the radiance of the sunset, lay range upon range of snow-clad rose-hued peaks and Anne restored to her more gentle mood, awed by the silent splendour of her surroundings, crept close to her lover, her voice soft with entreaty:

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“Martin, you will always be good to me. You will always love me, won’t you, even when we are old married people?”

She felt his arm quiver as he put it round her.

“I shall always be good to you, always love you, darling,” he said, and she failed to notice any omission in his answer.

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUITTING OF PARADISE

A WEEK later they found themselves amongst their fellows at Interlaken, and Martin saw how Anne shrank from them. He displayed a certain harshness in this matter, convinced that to face strangers was the only means of hardening her to present conditions, and for the first time since the day in Lady Rosendale's drawing room she was brought in contact with his forcefulness. He bent her to his will with a quiet insistence that she dared not resist; and she acquiesced, anxious to please him, fearing to battle with a nature so infinitely stronger than her own.

Her belief in their ultimate marriage weighed heavily on Sutherland at that time, and he could not understand this pusillanimous attitude, this backwash from intense emotional excitement, or believe she still clung to what he termed social shibboleths. Once the Rubicon passed, he had not expected these backward glances towards conformity, this fear of the penalties of the illicit. In the old days she had hated the fetters she now hankered after; she had despised a position for which she now craved. Truly women were incomprehensible! He found that his knowledge of them was superficial, if varied, and he was astounded at the intricacies he discovered in Anne, and at the limitations by which she was bound. Disturbed by this aspect of affairs, he made excuses to absent himself from her, and

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during long walks meditated on this latest development and tried to understand her attitude because he saw that her desire for the legal tie was becoming an obsession, and he debated whether his love for her could stand the test of confession. His realisation of her inability to face the world's scorn, to play a fine part in the drama of existence haunted him, for he hated anything that lowered her in his eyes, and this cowardice lowered her horribly. Yet he too was cowardly, he felt, in not speaking the truth. But how could he jeopardise their happiness by speech? That happiness which had proved more satisfying than anything of which he had ever dreamt? And so in a different manner both were conscious at that time of a rift in the lute, though each hid the knowledge from the other.

When they first reached an hotel, Anne tried to hide herself behind Sutherland; but finding that the people belonged to the class that laughs immoderately at feeble jokes and giggles behind what it terms a "serviette," she gathered up courage to face them, so the days passed pleasantly enough, and they had been at Interlaken a week before anything happened. Martin, who was of a gregarious nature, had made friends with Captain Morris, an officer in an infantry regiment, who was travelling with his wife. The men found interests in common, each being anxious to learn something that the other knew, and they fell into the habit of taking long walks together, leaving Anne and Mrs. Morris to their own devices. The latter, a gentle little woman whom Martin had nicknamed the "Brown Mouse," made shy overtures which Anne repulsed at first, fearful lest the truth of her relations with Sutherland should be

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discovered. But as the stranger persisted in a mild and insinuating manner, her frigidity melted, and a kind of friendship sprang up between them, until one day Mrs. Morris said :

“It must be so interesting to be the wife of a clever man like your husband ; a man in whose work you can be of such help.”

Anne made no reply, and the Brown Mouse continued :

“He is so agreeable and knows so much about all kinds of subjects, that Tom delights in him. My Tom is always anxious to learn about things outside his profession, for, as you see, he isn’t the narrow-minded type of soldier.” She paused, and added, with a little pleading air : “I do hope you will let us meet when we are back in England ; I should like it so much.”

A wintry smile crossed Anne’s face at the request.

“Certainly, if you are still of the same mind then—”

“You aren’t accusing me of being changeable, are you ? I really am not guilty of that fault.” She spoke with a little laugh.

“Circumstances alter cases. One sees things differently—under different aspects,” Anne paused, her hands folded tightly in her lap as she looked through the hall door at the misty evening. “If you still care to come and see us, I will let you know where we shall pitch our tent,” she added at last.

“Please do, I should love to come.”

Lady Inescourt laughed. “We shall see,” she answered harshly. The request had set her mind to work on her own affairs and plans, while at her side the little

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trickle of talk continued. She paid scant heed to it till she heard Mrs. Morris say :

“Your husband must be behind the scenes in all sorts of political affairs, and I suppose you help him enormously with his work, don’t you?”

The question suddenly opened a vista to Anne of a golden future in which she would sit by Martin’s side ; help him in his work, guide him by her criticisms, encourage him with her praise, and she turned eagerly to her companion.

“It’s heaven to be married to a man with a future, a career ; and hell to be tied to a man who hasn’t,” she exclaimed.

Mrs. Morris, startled by her vehemence, answered a little nervously : “I’m always glad Tom has a profession ; a man must feel dreadfully stranded with nothing to do.”

“Only the fools remain without a profession.” There was a world of contempt in her answer, and the Brown Mouse saw the brilliancy of her eyes as they shone in the gathering dusk of the hall. Mentally Anne was comparing Philip and Martin, to the detriment of the former.

“One is sorry for them,” said the soft voice at her elbow.

“Pure waste of sympathy, I assure you.”

“They can’t help it sometimes. Either they haven’t been brought up to do anything, or they haven’t the talent for it, or something of that kind.”

Anne laughed derisively. “They always find plenty of excuses ; generally stupid ones. The truth is they are too lazy, too incapable.” She paused, and continued bitterly, “I have neither pity for, nor patience

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with drones; men whose whole energy goes to sport. They are beneath contempt."

"I rather like sportsmen; there's something so clean and wholesome about them."

"Just as there is something wholesome in a cow-yard;—wholesome, but obnoxious."

Mrs. Morris made no reply. Anne was a new type to her, and she was a little awed; swept along breathlessly by her quickness, fascinated by her frail beauty, with its suggestion of passionate fierceness, its sudden vehemences. She thought it a pity Mrs. Sutherland was not a trifle calmer, and feared that she shared her husband's unorthodox views on marriage and various other things which to the Brown Mouse were great and holy; for she had the sweet natural outlook that comes of the simple mind and pure heart. Strange things frightened her so much that she shunned them, and the light of antagonism towards failures that flashed in Anne's eyes, led her to change the subject.

"I expect the hotel will fill up again to-night, don't you?"

"Probably we shall suffer from another influx of giggling women and impossible men."

As Anne spoke, the omnibus rumbled up to the door and began to disgorge its human packages. She watched them lazily, for she had forgotten her dread of finding acquaintances amongst them, and at present, her mind was filled with the thought of helping Sutherland in his career, until the familiar tones of Mrs. Chester's voice fell on her ear, and the well-known angularity of her figure blocked the open doorway as Anne heard her call tartly to her husband:

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“Come in, George, come in ; you really mustn’t stay in that awful draught or you will get another chill on your liver ; and you know how impossibly cross that makes you.”

The Master, who was extracting parcels and bags from the innermost recesses of the omnibus, replied that he was coming presently ; and Mrs. Chester marched into the hall as Anne, preparing to fly, rose from the sofa. But it was too late ; for as the old lady advanced, peering round her with beady eyes and the forward thrust of her head on its skinny neck, her glance fell on Lady Inescourt. For a second she hesitated, then seeing Mrs. Morris by her side—“How delightful,” she cried as she came forward ; “fancy finding you here.”

Swiftly she shot another glance at Mrs. Morris, who, she decided, must be Anne’s travelling companion, then she plunged into conversation. She was in her most genial mood after long banishment from home and from the cronies, and she was thankful to find anybody who could talk of the homeland that she loved. Even Anne, whom she detested, was welcome.

“This exile has nearly been the death of me ! And as for the poor, dear Master’s temper while he was drinking the waters at Homburg, you have no conception what he was like. It would have tried a saint.” She smiled still more benignly as she remembered that now she could elucidate for herself the unfathomed mystery of Stiffborough, so she continued confidentially, after a pause, “Do come and talk to him, or share our table ; you and—your friend. It would please him enormously to have two pretty young women to talk to.”

Anne smiled nervously. “Thanks, I am afraid I

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—we—can't join the table; we have made all our plans. It would have been delightful otherwise.” Her tongue worked stiffly, her lips were dry, and she trembled as she met the old lady's searching gaze.

“Well, well; if that's no good, mind you come and talk to the Master. Where on earth has he got to. I particularly told him not to lose himself; but men are so silly.” She turned round, seeking her husband. “He really must come, he will be so delighted to see anybody from home. By the way, I saw Philip when I was at Marston one day. He and Eleanor came in and I thought him looking so seedy. Of course, like all men, he said he was perfectly well; but they are all sons of Ananias, as well as sons of Belial.” Smiling affably at Mrs. Morris she added, “Don't you agree?” Without waiting for an answer, she rattled on to Anne. “When are you going back? You young married women are very wicked, the way you desert your homes and duties, you know!” She shook a roguish finger at her, then espying the Master, loaded with wraps and packages, beckoned to him, and cried coquettishly: “Come and see who is here, George.”

But Anne could stand no more. “I must go,” she said hoarsely. Then she turned to Mrs. Morris, “Are you coming?”

“I promised to wait here for Tom.” Evidently the little lady had not grasped the situation, for her smile was serene and friendly.

“I must go—I can't wait,” Anne repeated, scarcely conscious of her own words. “Do come.”

She dared not leave the women together; yet to remain was impossible, for at any moment her name

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might be mentioned, so she fled up the stairs and glancing back, saw that Mrs. Chester had seated herself on the sofa beside the little Brown Mouse.

When Martin returned, half-an-hour later, he found Anne in a state of pitiable agitation. Flinging herself into his arms she poured forth the tale of her meeting with Mrs. Chester.

"I don't know what I shall do; for she is sure to find out."

"Well, what does it matter?"

"Oh, it does, for she'll cut us dead, or something dreadful of that sort."

"Well, it's got to come sooner or later; so we may as well get hardened before we reach home."

Although she had realized that sooner or later social ostracism must be their fate, its imminence unnerved her. It was infinitely worse than she had imagined, for Mrs. Chester's advent had rekindled all her nervousness, all her love of the conventional, her fear of things unpleasant.

"She will look at the visitor's book and see that we are put down as 'Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland,' or Mrs. Morris will call me Mrs. Sutherland, and then it will all come out," she wailed; nor would she face the "old cat," she declared. They must dine alone upstairs or go to another hotel. Wild proposals to flee Interlaken at once fell from her, alternating with a torrent of entreaty that Martin should protect her. He listened in silence, his back towards her as he stood at the window and stared into the gathering night.

"Come, come, Anne, it's no good making all this

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fuss," he objected at last, as he began to dress for dinner. "We've got to go through it you know sooner or later."

Harassed and frightened, she fell to weeping, and accused him of heartlessness, but his patience with her was great; no rough word escaped him, no reproof for a cowardice which he failed to understand. She must surely have expected this treatment from her fellows from the outset, he thought? But she was a woman, therefore privileged to display unreason and feminine petulance, so he made allowances for her.

Meanwhile in the hall the little Brown Mouse had, all unconsciously, revealed Anne's secret as she sang the praises of "Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland." She spoke of the woman's charm and beauty, of the man's brilliancy; of their devotion and absorption in one another, and Mrs. Chester drank it in with open ears and a mouth grimly set in lines that curved now and again to an even grimmer smile. Many thoughts filtered through her mind and, mingled with the satisfaction at having verified her suspicions, was an overwhelming pity for the man she had known from his childhood and whose wife had played him this evil trick. But above all other feelings was a vindictive hatred of Anne and a resolve to punish her. The opportunity arose late that same evening when Anne and Martin came face to face with the Chesters.

The guilty couple had taken their places in the lift when the M.F.H. and his wife appeared, and as the older woman's beady eyes met those of her enemy, she withdrew her foot from the threshold of the lift, and said icily that she preferred walking upstairs. The cut was complete; and Anne, with quivering lips, slipped her hand into Martin's.

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"Oh, Martin, Martin," she wailed, "What shall I do? I can't bear it—indeed I can't."

The next day they left Interlaken, but a gloom he could not dispel had settled on Anne. The sombreness of her eyes increased, her lips seldom lifted in their little crooked smile; her life was clouded with fear, and although she never referred to the episode of the Chesters, he knew it was seldom absent from her thoughts. Two days later on the Channel boat, he found her in a dark corner leaning against the taffrail, her face wet with tears, her body convulsed with sobs. Slipping his arm round her, he sought by all the means in his power to comfort her; but she wept with the abandonment of a child, clinging to him with a grip of agonised fear.

"At all events, December sees the end of this absolute hell. The six months will be up, and Phil will divorce me; then we can be married before so very long. Everything will be different after that, won't it? Nobody can say anything when we are married, can they?"

He made no reply, and feeling his arms slacken in their hold, she looked up and saw his face white and set. The old furtiveness was in his eyes as he avoided her gaze and she, half frightened, repeated her question: "That will make it all right, won't it?"

Still he kept silence, biting his lip as he stared at the grey-green waters of the Channel through which the "Pas de Calais" lurches heavily forwards. Then he kissed her and walked away.

CHAPTER XVII

THE AWAKENING OF PHILIP

THE keeping of Philip's secret would have been easy enough, for Anne's parents had died when she was a baby and the aunt who had brought her up was now touring in Italy. There had too been little love lost between aunt and niece, so they seldom heard from one another, and indeed a year and a half having elapsed without any letter from Mrs. Broadbent it was unlikely that correspondence would be resumed. In that direction therefore there was little chance of betrayal.

Despite, however, all the care on both Philip's and Miriam's part to hide the real cause of Anne's absence from Stiffborough, the truth leaked out after its usually exasperating way. Whether it was owing to Mrs. Chester, or whether it was merely whispered conjecture among neighbours which, after the fashion of such conjectures, slowly but surely became a concrete fact, nobody knew. By the end of the summer the country-side knew that Lady Inescourt's absence was no temporary or trivial matter, though nobody ventured to refer to it in any way before Philip till Mrs. Chester one day boldly broached it. She was a woman of few subtleties and no finesse, but of infinite courage where her "principles" were concerned or where she felt it right to speak her mind, and above all she was not of those wise people who realise that home truths are better reserved for enemies than friends. Therefore without preliminaries she

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attacked the subject one autumn day when Philip, in all innocence of what awaited him, went to pay her a visit.

He found her enthroned on a massive Victorian sofa flanked by an equally massive table drawn near the fire, because autumn had come early that year and the days were chill with the sting of the north wind that brought flocks of geese sailing south in their ribbon-like formations. Without more ado Mrs. Chester informed her guest of the meeting at Interlaken with Anne and Sutherland. Inescourt flinched; his face which had lost its usual colour and had become old and haggard in these days grew ashen. The blow had fallen; and he knew that all hope of secrecy being ended he must from this time onwards face the horror of pity or contempt at his betrayal. He looked at Mrs. Chester in silence for a moment.

"Yes," he said quietly, "they went away in June, but I'm not going to divorce her unless she asks me to do so a second time. She doesn't understand what it would mean to herself and her position."

It was the same argument he had used to Miriam when he shewed her his wife's selfish letter, and Mrs. Chester hearing it for the first time snorted loudly. She thought him an ass and was at no pains to hide her opinion.

"I've always thought you a fool and your wife a rogue. Perhaps you will agree that I was right." She said acidly enough. But nevertheless her beady eyes were kindly in their expression as they rested on Philip.

A sullen look settled on the young man's face. He was indisposed to talk of Anne, at all events in these terms, and yet conscious of his hostess's veiled kindness

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and loth, in his distress, to alienate her; besides Anne's social future lay, in a fashion in her hands and he would on no account jeopardise it.

"I prefer not discussing my wife," he said coldly, "I hope she will come back to me, so the least said about it the sooner it will be mended. It will be far easier for you and everybody else to receive her again if nothing is said. When she comes back—" After a little pause he added: "She hasn't been to blame. I was a fool, Sutherland was a scoundrel and she—well, she was the victim, that's all"

Mrs. Chester shot him a swift glance. "Still a fool—a blindly quixotic one, and so you will remain till the end of the chapter."

Her remark though it sounded harsh was softened by the kindness that lurked beneath its seeming acidity, and he answered with a smile of wintry sorrowfulness.

"I suppose so—I hope so, if it's going to make for happiness—and peace," he answered.

"A loyal fool, Phil—'Steadfast' is your family motto, and steadfast you are—you dear, good, stolid idiot!" Her voice grew tender and leaning forward, she patted his arm. Then, as she looked away from him, she added softly: "Well, well; if Providence had seen fit to bless me with children I should have been content with a son like you—and—a daughter like—Miriam."

"There aren't many like Mim, are there?" he spoke eagerly.

"So you see that, do you—a little late in the day?" She laughed, but there was no hardness in the sound; and he looked at her questioningly.

"Of course, I've always known it, always appreciated her ever since we were kids together."

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“You didn’t appreciate her enough to marry her.” “And with any luck, may yet do so,” she added to herself. But even she stopped short of speech here.

After that the months glided by uneventfully, and it was on a December evening that Miriam, standing in the drawing-room window, watched Philip disappear down the drive. He had ridden over for luncheon, and had remained talking until the short winter day had closed in. Even then he lingered, as though he found it difficult to tear himself from the old-fashioned room redolent of pot-pourri and dried lavender.

“It’s always so jolly and peaceful here,” he said, as though seeking to excuse the frequency and length of his visits, and for a moment, as he held her hand he hesitated, as though on the point of saying something more. The troubled expression which betrayed the vain effort to find the word he needed, showed itself in his face, but in the end, he bade her good-bye, rather brusquely, and departed.

As she saw him ride away between the leafless trees, her fingers were still numbed by the vigour of his farewell, and her face wore the radiant, reminiscent smile with which a woman watches her beloved. There was an air of exultation about her; a content in her heart passing words as she watched him vanish in the gathering shadows of the night.

She wondered whether he realised, as she did, whither they were both drifting, or whether he was still blind to the current of events, to the rapid development of their future? Unlike Anne, she was not of those who weary themselves and their neighbours with minute self-analysis and soul-probing; nor was she for ever

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seeking abstruse explanations of the simple facts of existence. She calmly accepted the inevitable, and with regard to the complex she waited until Time, the revealer, should disclose its secret to her. It was so in the present case, and she had not meddled with conjectures concerning their mutual feelings. Her own she knew of old; his she surmised by observation.

The past months had produced a swift advance in their relations; for although Philip no longer craved the consolation which she had not been niggardly in bestowing at first, his visits had neither decreased in frequency nor length. But Miriam's primary attitude—the mother instinct to protect a wounded creature in need of comfort—merely veiled the old unalterable love of the woman for the man, which no amount of sisterly affection, or mothering could alter. He had remained blind to these developments, she had realised them and seen whither all her tending and care of him led, as with infinite pain she saw that the love she had tried to stifle was fluttering back to life and growing daily stronger.

There was something horrible to her in the idea that her love should be bestowed on a man bound to another woman by ties which she held inviolable, and by dint of much dwelling on these things she began to imagine herself guilty of sin, for the old vicar had impregnated her with the rigid creed that in such matters fails to differentiate between thought and deed, so that Miriam, tolerant where her fellows were concerned, judged herself with pitiless severity and the feeling that she was guilty, in any degree, of departing from precepts she revered was a source of acute torture. But as time passed and things fell into their correct perspective, she judged more

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dispassionately, and realising that evil could by no means be imputed to her, she accepted the fact of her love for Philip.

But she would have been more than human, had she not sought to peer a little into the future. Had she not questioned concerning Philip's feelings, when she saw that he, too, was touched by that same element of change, that consciousness of new influences which had touched her and resuscitated the old love. Philip had, he knew, turned to Miriam from the moment of Anne's desertion, and in his old friend he had found the comfort that his sick soul needed. She had guided him on the least painful road ; shared and hidden his secret ; above all, she had been capable of understanding him without insisting on the words which were at all times such an effort to his halting tongue. These things had drawn him to her, until even he began to perceive dimly that she dominated his life, whilst the days—few in number—on which they failed to meet became for him burdened with lagging hours.

When his trouble was new, its burden intolerable, he had been wont to sit with Miriam for hours at a time plunged in a morose silence from which he would rouse himself to talk of Anne, her flight, her possible return, on which he pinned his faith with blind assurance. He was filled with dread lest she should be unhappy, until at last incapable of remaining still under the possession of that haunting fear, he would pace the room with restless steps. Gradually Miriam weaned him from such morbidness, and by inducing him to talk and think of other matters, she forced him to gather up the threads of his daily life. As he grew calmer, Anne's name became

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less frequent in his talk, and after three months he found himself riding, shooting, farming, with a faintly increasing return of his old zest, whilst he reported the veriest minutiae of his doings to Miriam, certain of her comprehension and sympathy.

From speaking less frequently of Anne's return, he began to relegate it to the background of his thoughts, till the prospect became improbable, and developed even into a subject for alarm, almost for aversion, as he found himself questioning uneasily what her presence would mean to him. In the event of her return—that problematical return, as it now seemed in view of her silence—he wondered whether they would ever succeed in uniting their lives after this terrible severance? How could they ever look one another in the face again? How could they ever forget what had happened? He shunned all thought of the meeting; shuddered at the image of Sutherland standing between them, as he must do for the rest of their lives. If she returned, how cruelly he would dread another disaster, how inevitably he would see a potential traitor in every man who addressed her.

All these possibilities he understood as the months passed towards Christmas. But his promise was given—he would wait till the appointed time, though convinced now that Anne had indeed found happiness with her lover. It seemed strange to him that he could accept this solution of matters so calmly, for he found neither repining nor regret in his heart, and he pondered, in his slow, guileless manner on the healing effect of time upon the deepest of wounds, and failed to realise what had happened until the truth dawned upon him a few weeks before the evening on which Miriam watched him disappear through the dusk.

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It came about as he rode along the marsh one morning and paused to watch his sheep, sturdy folk with inky legs and faces illumined by agate and topaz-coloured eyes. He heard the scuffling of their feet on the damp ground as they plucked a mouthful of samphire, or investigated a puddle with quick snuffings, and he spoke to the shepherd who followed them, and then turned his horse's head along the marsh where he saw another rider gazing seawards. It was Miriam, and quickening his pace over the soft ground, he joined her, noticing, as he did so, that she sat her horse slackly, holding the reins with a strange air of dejection. As he drew up by her side, he saw tears in her eyes, a droop about her lips.

"What's the matter, Mim? Can I do anything?" he asked quickly. She shook her head.

"I've had bad news from India—Jack Frazer is dead."

Philip exclaimed regretfully at the news. "He was such a topper. I wish one had seen more of him lately, but he was always so busy when he was at home that it was hard to get hold of him."

She nodded; and a tear stole down her cheek.

"You and he were tremendous friends always," he resumed, wondering how he could best express his sympathy, yet fearful of adding to her grief by speaking.

"So you'll feel it awfully, poor old Mim. What did he die of?"

"Fever," she answered in a low tone. "And he was alone. His sister wrote to me." She stared before her blinded with tears.

"Poor old chap, what a hard thing to die alone in a foreign country."

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"Don't," she cried fiercely. "It's my fault. He needn't have died but for my selfishness. Anyhow he needn't have died alone."

Philip looked at her in surprise. "Your fault! What on earth do you mean?"

"Last time he was home, he asked me to marry him—and I—wouldn't—I was horribly selfish—horribly," she cried, filled with remorse accentuated by her present surroundings, which recalled the whole episode. She had purposely ridden out here with the desire to flagellate her soul for what she now considered an unpardonable act of selfishness. "Don't talk to me, I hate myself," she continued, with a petulance strangely foreign to her, as he tried to murmur a few inarticulate words of sympathy.

But for some unexplained reason sympathy was difficult of attainment. Philip was sorry for Jack, because he had been a good fellow, a true friend. But why had he wanted to marry Miriam? The thought angered him against the man with whom he had played in their childhood, whom he had loved as a companion in later years.

As Miriam grew calmer—for she seldom allowed her emotions to overpower her as completely as they had done a moment ago—she poured forth to Philip, in her hour of sore distress, all that burnt within her. She told him of Jack's devotion, of his clinging to a vain hope of her consent, and, in the end, of his final proposal here on the very spot on which they stood. She reproached herself for selfishness in not accepting him, holding herself responsible for his death, and tears flowed as she spoke. Philip had never seen her so

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moved or inaccessible to comfort, and he listened, distressed at her pain and at his inability to help her, till, at last, she begged him to leave her. She would be better alone till she could "behave rationally" as she said with a wintry smile. He turned his horse's head towards the land, and rode slowly away, but there stirred within him an insensate wrath against Frazer. He was indignant that he should have contemplated Miriam in the light of a possible wife. Nobody was worthy of this dear being who fulfilled all his own ideals of perfected womanhood. Besides, what would he himself do without her? That was his first feeling.

His second was, why should he hold her above marriage? Was it not a woman's natural vocation to marry and have children? But he flinched at the thought of Miriam, occupied with the details of her own home, unable to throw herself into his life and interests. By that time he had reached the Hall, and passed to his room, still pursued by the idea that another man might usurp the foremost place in her life. It was such an intolerable contingency that he forgot it was at an end so far as Jack was concerned. The thought of Miriam as any man's wife exasperated him, and he called himself a "selfish cad" for his desire to monopolise the sympathies and affections of this "best of women." Friendship at its highest, sought the happiness of its fellow even to the detriment of its own. He sought his happiness before hers, his well-being in place of hers. Suddenly he realised that he was jealous—madly jealous of any man, alive or dead, who stood between them; and it was but a short step to the comprehension that Miriam

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had ceased to be a friend. He saw in amazement whither everything tended; he understood that during the past few months Anne, by her cruelty, had effectually slain his love for her, while sympathy had kindled his old affection for Miriam into something richer. He saw now that his feelings were in truth not of to-day, nor even of yesterday, but that they had always existed somewhere at the back of his consciousness, and that from their childhood she had been the woman to whom he had instinctively turned, the woman he should have married.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANNE'S NEW LIFE

PHILIP'S lack of a profession had always offended Anne. She had been swift to deride "human drones," to declare that "every man ought to have an occupation." The prosaic round of a country squire, absorbed in the management of his property did not appeal to her as an equivalent, and she had plainly shown her husband that she considered him a drone in the hive of human activity.

Had she substituted the word "career" for profession, she would have been nearer the mark, for it was a "career" in the arena of publicity, not the drudgery of a profession, that she really courted, since the former would have brought reflected glory to herself. It was Sutherland's prominence in his work that first appealed to her, since the innate snobbishness of the Anglo-Saxon tended in her case to the worship of notoriety and her vanity had been flattered by the fact that a clever man found pleasure in her company. These influences were still strong within her and she found consolation at the prospect of returning to England, in the thought that it meant a resumption of the work which had brought fame to Sutherland.

She began to look forward to sharing his inmost working life, for she saw that no meagre portion of that life was absorbed in his profession. She pictured herself inspiring and encouraging him to fresh successes, by

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her praise or criticism. Often in the old days he had sought her opinion, declaring that a woman's intuitions and quickness of ear were helpful in questions of diction, and these attributes would, she felt, be demanded of her now. But a short time sufficed to show that she had dreamt empty dreams, and that disadvantages which far outweighed its fancied advantages, were attached to the toiler's life.

Sutherland was compelled to work with unflagging energy to provide for the maintenance of his wife in the asylum, and for Anne's needs, and she soon found daily journalism, beheld from within, differed widely from her preconceived ideas. It dislocated her day, and, being an essentially orderly and fastidious woman, she resented such dislocation, for if she was, to some extent, an artist in her feelings, she was by no means a Bohemian in her way of life, and she now realised that between the two a wide gulf was fixed. Once established in a tiny flat overlooking Battersea Park, she saw little of her lover, for he often left early in the afternoon, and seldom returned till the chill of approaching dawn heralded another day. To atone for these hours, and the consequent lack of rest, he would sleep late in the morning, and rise with a mind preoccupied by the coming night's work, or by the rhythm of the poems which helped to swell the small total of his income.

She found him a more earnest toiler than she had expected. She saw that even the drudgery of his profession held a certain charm for him, which she resented in that he gave her no opportunity of helping him; for his work was executed at the office, far from her influence, and she was not the recipient of political

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secrets on which hung the fate of nations, nor did she behold statecraft in its nakedness as she had imagined. There was little romance or poetry, but a great deal of labour and prose in the crude facts of journalism, and she resented it.

As a matter of fact Martin's aim was to place Anne outside his work. He banished home ties when he entered the office doors, and Anne, seeing her exclusion from his life, was not behindhand in shewing her offence. He received her reproaches so patiently however, answered her so tenderly, that she was ashamed of her mood and tried to face her disappointment with equanimity.

But there were other flaws in her life which soon made themselves felt. Accustomed to comfort she was horrified when she realised that Martin's income, after the deduction had been made for Milly's maintenance, scarcely reached five hundred a year, and that even this amount depended on his health and the quality of his work. The counting of farthings had always exasperated her, and now toil though she might, over the weekly books, their figures invariably exceeded the means at her disposal. She also began to realise, for the first time, how much she depended on the society of her fellows, from whom she was entirely cut off, since even her peregrinations through the streets were curtailed through fear of encountering old friends and meeting another such rebuff as Mrs. Chester had administered at Interlaken, and so the time dragged interminably, till she fell into the habit of spending long hours in Battersea Park, were she knew herself safe from awkward meetings. Round and round those tortuous paths, skilfully engineered to convey the idea of space, did she wander, watching with

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envious eyes the artizans and their girls strolling with arms intertwined, unmindful of the conventions and reticences which hamper a superior class in its demonstrations of affection. She leant over the railings and watched the children, pale-faced, pinched, and none too clean in appearance or language, as they played on the sodden grass. All these people had companions; but she was condemned to a solitude, accentuated by the comradeship of those around her.

Finally she took refuge in writing verses, but though she worked hard she was incapable of producing satisfactory work. Her power—of a moderate quality at any time—had deserted her, and there was, she found, a vast difference between writing in the calm, inspiring solitudes of Stiffborough to doing so in the cheap flat whose walls acted as conductors to the five finger exercises of one neighbour and the plaintive wails of another's baby. At Stiffborough she had been surrounded by all the luxury of a big house; there had been no nightmare of household books, nor had she been forced to contend with a cheap “general” whose ideas of housework consisted in transferring the dust from one portion of the room to another by blowing moistly upon it. Her attempts at polishing wineglasses also revolted Anne, for it took the form of breathing heavily into them and bestowing a final “shine” with a dirty dishcloth, or a stray rag unearthed from some corner, whose grime her mistress dared not contemplate. Such methods struck Anne as barbaric, and she turned against them with physical repulsion, as she recalled the gleaming silver and spotless linen at Stiffborough; the polished mahogany dinner-table with its vases of flowers, and all the

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simple comfort of her old home. She failed to remember the troubles that had apparently existed there in bygone days. Had they, she began to question, been the outcome of her fertile imagination? Had she encouraged fancied woes because they harmonised with those poetic outpourings which demanded some cause of melancholy as a justification for their existence?

Another source of disappointment lay in the fact that Martin no longer encouraged her to write. Her knowledge of humanity being, like so much else about her, of a superficial quality, she failed to realise that although a man may encourage a woman in the production of indifferent artistic work when friendship binds them, once he stands in a closer relation to her, he will discourage her efforts by all the means at his disposal. This was Martin's case, his literary and artistic standard being too high to tolerate the idea that Anne's name should be branded as mediocre. He was not wilfully unkind in his criticisms of the verses she submitted to him; but his caustic comments and unconsciously annihilating suggestions filled her with anguish, till she ceased to write.

Nothing else being left her she walked constantly in the park, her thoughts flying to the past, and as the autumn leaves fell, and gaudy sunsets painted the sky, she would recall the marshes, crimson with samphire; the undulating mainland clad in its grey-green mantle of root crops, enlivened by the vivid glare of the mustard whose penetrating scent seemed to reach her as she walked beneath the smoky sky. The cry of gulls, the whistle of plovers, or the sharp call of partridges scuttling over the stubble fields, echoed in her ears, and she

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forgot the soot-choked elms and plane trees, the dirty children, the blatantly amorous lovers around her. Slowly it dawned upon her that the land she had despised was replete with beauties to which she had been blind and that stood forth now in memories of tantalising loveliness. Not, she inwardly declared, that she regretted her actions, or was disappointed with regard to the present. She had chosen Martin, sacrificed the world for him, and she was glad. She insistently told herself she had acted for the best and that life was proving all she had imagined. It was comparatively easy to believe these things on fine days, when, sun-lover that she was, her spirits ran high; but it was more difficult as the gloom of winter chilled her to the bone. Nevertheless, she was assured that all was well, since, by dint of much assertion, a woman can persuade herself to accept whatever she has set her mind on accepting. However, she could not blink the fact that there were disappointments and annoyances which she faced with indifferent success, and although Martin was an ideal lover, there were moments when his finer instincts were in abeyance and his origin betrayed itself now that he was less on his guard, less given to weighing every word and action, and she feared lest time might display further failings capable of wrecking the frail barque of her dreams.

Martin did not realise her disappointment, nor the acuteness of her distress regarding money. Its scarcity fretted him, because it denied him the pleasure of giving her the luxuries to which she had been accustomed, but its lack was no great drawback to him. As for the habits of the "general," he had seen worse examples in the old days, and many disadvantages were palliated by his

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return to the work that he loved. Good work struck the keynote of existence for him, and even Anne's charms waned beside the satisfaction this afforded him. But his joy at a return to the hustle of London, for which he had sighed more than once during his holiday, was tempered, passed by the strain of close application. He discovered frets and irritations in his office life which his happiness at home accentuated. His happiness demanded more time for its enjoyment, more freedom for its pleasures, and he caught himself thinking of Anne when less pleasant matters should have filled his mind. The printer's devil, darting in and out of his room, angered him, because his brain seemed to work less swiftly, his pen paused more frequently over the slips of paper on his table than it had done of old. Journalism was a more exacting mistress than he had realised. She tolerated no rival, but commanded a complete allegiance, a sacrifice of mind and body, so that vengeful at his temerity in allowing another to supplant her in his affections, she subjected him to a chastening which he resented as slowly, but surely, he saw his work deteriorating; important "stuff" hitherto allotted to his pen was entrusted to others, while he was relegated to dull topics usually assigned to less experienced hands. These facts were hardly calculated to cheer a man whose income depended on his pen.

He said nothing to Anne about his anxieties, but one foggy December afternoon, when he was sunk in a painful review of his position, she disturbed him by saying fretfully that she could not keep the butcher's book down. There was an element of raw unsavouriness about this particular account which always offended

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Martin's susceptibilities, and to-day, he was in no mood for further annoyance. Nevertheless, he turned to her with a commiserating smile:

"Poor little girl; I'm sorry. What shall I do to help? Feed at the club, or a pot-house near my work?"

The solution was so truly masculine and unpractical that it called forth a faint smile.

"No, that wouldn't help. On the contrary it would merely be a double expense, as you would have to pay there, and the meat would be wanted here just the same."

"I hadn't thought of that," he answered, with a laugh, and taking her face in his hands he kissed the lips that pouted fretfully, as he said:

"What else can I do to help?" She shrugged her shoulders, and a flicker of annoyance showed itself in her countenance. She hesitated for a second, and looking at him, wondered whether she dared venture the solution which presented itself to her. Woman-like, she was incapable of avoiding a subject which she had studiously resolved to shun.

"You might let me use Philip's money," she said the more curtly that she feared the reception her words might encounter. Nor was she wrong, for Martin drew back with an impatient movement.

"I've already told you it's impossible," he said sharply. "You shall not use it whilst you live under my roof. In my sight you are my wife, and you have no right to touch another man's money. I can, and do, keep you, not in riches, I know; still we get along, and I prefer starvation to living on Inescourt's charity."

Not to be deterred by one denial, she said querulously-

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ly, "I wish you would be more reasonable about it. It would make things so much easier for me if you would."

"Anne, how dare you?" he cried angrily. She was frightened.

"Forgive me; I'm sorry. But, it's so dreadfully hard to make the two ends meet."

She stood before him—tears in her eyes, distress quivering on her lips. Instantly he softened. After all, it was his fault that this frail, luxurious creature was reduced to such straits. He smiled, held out his arms, and she went to him clasping both hands round his neck, with a little coaxing movement.

"There's another way you could help, darling," she murmured in her most seductive tones.

"What is that? Become a vegetarian?" he asked, seeking by raillery to dispel her woes. "It shall be done at once. Let us have a dinner of herbs with content, and ignore the existence of the stalled ox, or the fatted calf." A smile softened his face, and he crushed her to him with that forcefulness she loved. Looking down he saw that her eyes still shone with the glitter of tears which invariably disarmed him. "Tell me, darling, what do you want me to do?"

"You might send less money to your sister every week."

She spoke tentatively, fearful of rousing his wrath again, yet determined to leave no stone unturned. She knew that he paid a considerable sum for Milly's maintenance, and had accounted it to him for righteousness, till this steady deduction from their income had caused her to resent a generosity which sacrificed her comfort to that of a crazed sister. 267

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She plucked at the button-hole of his coat, and continued, "It makes such a big gap in our tiny income, doesn't it? Surely a brother isn't expected to keep his sister?"

He stared over her head in silence, his brows knitted, his mouth set, for his deceit was coming home to roost after the fashion of all evil things.

"I must," he said, "whatever other men do, or do not do."

She made an impatient movement. "You're too generous; that's the truth of the matter—quixotically generous." She paused, and added, with a laugh, "I rather love you for it, darling; but still—don't I come first."

"Of course you do. But there are—other duties." He spoke haltingly for her praise stung him, falsely earned as he knew it to be; and the old treachery stirred uneasily in its roosting place. He was filled with shame as she resumed:

"Duties are always such tiresome things. Besides, I come first, even as a duty, don't I?"

Again her laugh, engagingly soft and low, punctuated the question. It was a delicious sound. What did anything matter so long as he held her in his arms? So long as she enchanted him with her laughter, soothed him with her love?

"Of course; but that's a pleasant duty."

"Still, a duty, and therefore I ought to come before Milly. She's not your wife—She's not—what I am." A flush spread itself over her face; she lowered her head; she could never forget her position in the eyes of the world.

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"Don't let's discuss Milly," he said harshly.

"But I want to, because I think you're being traded on, darling. You're so generous that they make you pay more than you need; and after all, as she was married, some of her husband's people ought to look after her."

"He has none."

"Then your own people; why shouldn't they?"

"I have none."

She shrugged her shoulders petulantly. "Of course if you won't, you won't; and there's an end to it," she said sulkily, and disengaged herself from his arms. "After all, I ought to come first, since in a few months we shall be married; and you will have to provide for me when I'm your wife."

Silence—tense, ominous—followed; and Sutherland's hands clenched themselves against the mantelpiece, as he turned his back on the woman beside him.

It had been borne in upon him more and more forcibly of late, that some day Anne must learn the truth concerning Milly. The thought was unpleasant, and he had put it from him with the excuse that it was cruel to destroy her illusions. Now, facing the consequences, he was on the verge of blurting out the truth; but the clock sounding the hour in clear, metallic tones, reminded him that he was already late in starting for the office, and it was unwise to imperil the quality of his work by a "scene." So he bade her not to talk foolishly, and that were she ten times his wife, she could not have a greater claim on him.

But she was angry at not gaining her point, and retorted maliciously: "Then you shouldn't let me be so worried in order to send money to your sister. It's horribly unjust."

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He made no reply, but walked to the door, his face sullen; “I shan’t be back till late to-night,” he said coldly.

She ran to him and flung her arms round his neck, with a little cry of repentance: “Forgive me, Martin; please, please forgive me. I didn’t mean to be cross; but somehow I couldn’t help it.” She crept closer to him, looking up in his face. “I feel murderous towards Milly, sometimes. She seems to stand between us more than a sister ought. I don’t know why; but I’ve a horrible dislike for her, a dreadful jealousy even.”

He flinched; truly, Milly did stand between them; and he answered rather sorrowfully, “You needn’t feel jealousy or envy for that poor, mad creature whose husband left her long ago. He never loved her as I love you. He was too young to know what love meant, when he was caught by a pretty face which proved his curse.” He spoke feelingly; then seeing the wonder in her eyes, and fearful of having betrayed himself, he added rather quickly: “It was through her fault that the whole trouble occurred—not that it improves matters for anybody concerned, but—well, perhaps it exonerates the man a little for many things he did then—for many things he has done since.”

Anne listened with interest. He had been sparing of details hitherto; and she knew nothing beyond the fact, that, after an unfortunate married life, Milly’s husband had deserted her, and she had drifted from religious delusions into madness. Now as she heard him, her lips parted in a smile of pity for the woman, of admiration for Martin.

“How good you are, darling! I’m proud to see you

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so unselfish to her, so forgiving towards this man, when I think that but for his villainy you never need have had such an incubus on your shoulders."

"You don't know the whole story, Anne; so don't judge; for there are more things in all that affair 'than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' I'll tell you the story some day—perhaps to-night," he added with a sudden determination.

"Yes, do, it would interest me, because she is your sister, and you care for her."

He neither agreed with nor denied her statement. Then, after a pause: "Yes, I was fond of her once—poor thing," he said.

Walking to the office, he pondered over Anne's words concerning her approaching freedom. They had brought the old dread into his life. There was no solution for him, because in days gone by Milly had refused to divorce him, since her religious scruples forbade the dissolution of a bond she held sacred. Now there was no redress, and the thought of his bondage maddened him—not that he cared for himself, but because he saw how much it meant to Anne. Yet what tangible difference would it make to her position? Wife or mistress, she would never be received among the people who had welcomed her in old days. More and more did he suspect her of longing for the social delights which she had abjured for his sake; but he failed to understand the mental condition that pinned so much faith on a ceremony which in his lawless nature appeared futile.

After all, he thought, no woman would take so important a step as Anne had taken on the spur of the moment. She must have debated all the pros and cons

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of the situation long before the final scene in Lady Rosendale's drawing-room last July. That she had been carried away by the force of his words, swept into the whirlpool of passion by the mere spell of his personality, was a contingency too remote for contemplation. He had not yet fathomed the emotional capabilities of such a nature as hers.

As he walked to the office through the orange-hued fog, he debated whether or not he should reveal the truth to her to-night. It was alarming, since he suspected her of preferring the ignominy of a return to Philip, to facing the world permanently in her present position. The prospect of losing her was so intolerable that he was tempted to postpone the declaration of the truth, to keep his secret until the divorce was accomplished. The thought gripped him suddenly, and he saw all the possibilities the plan entailed. Once free from Philip she would have nobody but himself to turn to; there would be no course open but to remain with him. He revolted however from the baseness of such a scheme; because her admiration, her trust, her pride in him were integral portions of her love; and once they were eliminated, what would remain? So he thrust the temptation aside, and as he walked up the steps of the office, determined to tell her the truth that very night.

Meanwhile, Anne, seated by the fire, revolved in her own mind Martin's words concerning a possible undercurrent in the affairs of Milly's husband which excused him in some degree for his desertion. The thought of her lover's leniency brought a smile to her face. How wide-minded, how tolerant he had shown himself to this man whose villainy—she could find no

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other adequate word—had cast this heavy burden upon him. How admirable he was in his unfailing charity to this poor, insane creature who had no real claim on him! How good he was to Anne herself; how patient and tender! For a moment she saw herself as she was; a querulous woman, perpetually desiring the unattainable. She rested her forehead against her fingers, as they clung to the edge of the mantelboard, and her eyes gazed into the fire as her imagination travelled down the past months and flew thence to the future. Such an enchanted future it would be, when she could be Martin's wife in the eyes of the law.

The word “wife” had grown to possess a strange significance for her. It fascinated her, meaning infinitely more than she had realised in days gone by. To most women it is a mere statement of a condition; to Anne it had an added attraction now, because it lay beyond her reach. Formerly the word had represented an intolerable bondage; now it was the embodiment of what she most desired.

Standing before the fire, she recalled an early spring day on the marsh when she had cried aloud to herself that she would rather be Sutherland's mistress than any other man's wife. The words had appealed to her unbalanced dramatic sense, and satisfied her craving for effect. She had acted a part so incessantly that there were moments when she was unable to determine whether she was in earnest or whether she was merely posing before the mirror of her own imagination. But concerning the genuineness of that outcry she had been fully convinced at the time. Nearly two years had elapsed since then and perhaps she saw things more clearly, and

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shorn of their glamour ; but, as the past scene rose vividly before her, she found herself transported in fancy to the marsh. She heard the song of the spring, the plain-ing of the plovers above the fields, the murmur of the sea on the drab-hued foreshore. How long ago it had all been, and yet how distinctly she remembered everything connected with that moment of fierce outcry against the conventions of her life.

She had flung aside those conventions now. For six months she had experienced the freedom she craved ; she had followed her heart's desire ; eaten her fill of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. What was the result ? Satiety ? Regret ? No ! Merely an ever growing realisation that the word “wife” represented the one thing in the wide world worth possessing. Of what use was it for Martin to declare that in his sight she was in very deed his wife ? That assurance, sweet though it might be to her love, failed to satisfy her desire for the legal bond she had detested in days gone by. There was no blinking the fact that she lacked the courage of her convictions ; no denying that, at heart, she, like every other woman, not only rejoiced in the bondage of matrimony, but hugged and caressed her legal fetters.

“Wife ! Wife ! Wife !” That was the refrain of all her thoughts, the ultimate object of all her desires, as she turned impatiently from the fireplace and resumed the perusal of those horribly prosaic, disillusioning household books.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AWAKENING OF ANNE

NOW falling heavily had draped the trees of Battersea Park in a white shroud, and heaped itself along the parapet of the flats, clinging to the surface of the walls in light, downy patches, till the keen north-east wind caught it, and sent it whirling away to rejoin the falling flakes. From the balcony of Anne's little drawing-room its hard sharpness of light was reflected on the grey-green wall-paper of the room, on the knick-knacks and the few flowers that, in a sudden fit of extravagance, she had bought the previous day. A bright fire burnt in the grate, and although the morning was far advanced, Sutherland had only just finished breakfast for the debris of the meal stood on a table at the end of the room furthest from where Anne sat, in a deep arm-chair, before the fire. Before her, Martin, his right shoulder leaning against the mantelpiece, his face turned towards her, looked down at her as she gazed at him with frightened eyes that shone in her pinched white face.

"But I don't understand."

Her words broke the stillness in a plaintive bewildered tone, and his face twitched impatiently, he was strained to the limit of his strength.

Three weeks had elapsed since the afternoon on which he had determined to tell her the truth concerning Milly; and the hour of reckoning had sounded at last. Throughout the past days he had found good reasons, excuses in plenty, in favour of silence. First of all, Christmas being at hand, he hesitated to spoil her anti-

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cipation of their brief holiday ; and moreover there was a certain irony in choosing the proverbial period of peace and goodwill, for the hour of his abasement in her eyes. He had also been absorbed in a series of important political articles entrusted to him by one of the leading reviews, and he saw in this work the chance to refute his detractors' assertions that of late his hand had lost its cunning, his mental capacity had deteriorated. The fierce recriminations, the anger and tears which must be the inevitable outcome of his confession would handicap him heavily at this juncture, when necessity demanded peace and freedom from worry. The possibility of falling out of the journalistic race filled him with alarm, and strung his being up to so high a pitch of tension that the least distraction might unhinge his mind, strained to its utmost capacity. These things he knew, but circumstances fought against him, and he found himself confronted by the ordeal he had shunned, for that morning the post had brought news of Philip Inescourt's preliminary steps for divorce, and Anne was wildly excited.

Sutherland shrank when she flung her arms round his neck and remained mute, though he kissed her with sudden passion ; but after that outburst he grew unresponsive and ate his breakfast in silence. Attributing his preoccupation to the work in which she knew him to be engaged, she moved about the room noiselessly ; though her exultation manifested itself in the lightness of her movements, which reminded him of a bird flitting from bough to bough. He found himself watching her when he could do so unobserved, painfully conscious of the gladness of her mood, of her repressed desire to speak and draw him into the net of her rejoicing, and these

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matters were scarcely a helpful prelude to what lay before him.

Breakfast eaten, he had begged her to sit down, as he had something of importance to say concerning the solicitor's letter. She obeyed, the brightness still in her face. He had hesitated, as the old temptation swept over him again. Why tell her? Why not let matters go on till there was no escape for her?

He turned from the temptation with a movement of repulsion, and summoning up his courage, told her the truth with the inevitable crudeness pertaining to such moments. There was neither circumlocution nor excuse. He palliated nothing, hid nothing; and as he spoke, the radiance of her expression gave place to bewildered surprise; that was swept away by a grey veil of fear which spread itself over her features and dimmed her eyes. Still he continued speaking, whilst, in the deep armchair, she seemed to shrink, to dwindle to something piteously small and frail, and having steeled himself to meet hysterical outbursts, uncontrolled floods of tears, fierce recriminations and selfish plaints, her silence and that strange dwindling terrified him. Pausing at last, he asked whether she heard?

"Oh, yes," she said in a dull, toneless voice; but offered no further comment. Later on, when he repeated his question, she repeated her answer in the same toneless voice, only this time she added pathetically: "I don't understand."

"My dear child, you must understand." There was an impatient note in his voice; for he had neither the courage nor the power to go through the miserable story again. He wished she would cry out, abuse him.

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Anything rather than sit and stare at him with that petrifying fixity.

“There’s very little to understand, except the fact that Milly is my wife—not my sister as I have always led you to suppose.” He paused for her to make some comment, but none was forthcoming, and he continued with the harshness born of prolonged strain.

“I’m married—I was a fool in years gone by, and fell in love with a pretty face. Many men have done it, many men will do it, and every one of them will curse the day he did. The penalty is generally a heavy one. Personally, I’ve been through quite a good private hell of my own in punishment of my idiocy,” he added grimly.

She looked at him with wide eyes of bewilderment and fear. It was beyond her usually swift brain to grapple with all he had told her in the last half-hour. His words sharp, incisive, savouring of an immense bitterness, had fallen on her ears but she had failed to understand them. They had stunned her and she remained as ignorant of their full import, as incapable of comprehending their meaning, as she was of understanding the insults addressed to one another by the sparrows, squabbling over the crumbs on the balcony. One fact, however, she had grasped from the first. He was married. That statement had burnt itself into her brain with a sense of jealousy which numbed her to everything else. She wished she could grasp more clearly what he meant, so she said again slowly that she did not understand.

His heart smote him for all he had forced her to endure, for all she would still need to face. He resumed his speech—that terrible repetition of things cruelly,

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harshly true—and he spoke deliberately since it was better, for both of them, that each word should carry its full weight of meaning, that she should understand everything and not wrestle vainly with her comprehension. Her air of strain, of rudderless bewilderment, as she drifted on a sea of terrible facts, was excruciating to him.

“It’s all long past—when I was young. I separated from her many years ago, because she was impossible. We were utterly wretched and I hadn’t seen her for a long time till last year. When we first separated I asked her to divorce me. Goodness knows there was ample cause; no lack of proof, and—well, I wanted my freedom.” He paused, and his mind flew to the days when he had pleaded for release, partly because he desired his freedom, partly because, by some odd kink in his character, he was averse from sinning whilst bound to this woman of strict conformity. In those days his conscience had still been tender, still in a manner controlled by those solid, middle-class forbears who held such rigid views concerning marital duties.

“But Milly refused. She owned what you women rejoice in—scruples. Hers were of a religious, yours of a social order; thanks to her scruples I am still her husband in the eyes of the law.”

Anne gazed at him; then said reproachfully, “And you never told me.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Why should I?”

She made no reply, but plucked at the material of her dress and pleated it mechanically into tiny folds.

“I shouldn’t have come—at least—I don’t think I should,” she said. She wondered vaguely why the

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existence of Sutherland's wife should form a greater barrier than the existence of her own husband.

"After all, what difference did your knowledge or ignorance of facts make? We loved one another." He waited to see if she would speak, but she continued her pleating operations, her eyes fixed on her task, and he resumed: "You chose me out of all the world to be your lover; presumably you were prepared to acknowledge that fact before all the world. That was my reading of your answer when I asked you to leave your husband, and you consented. I imagined you had the courage of your convictions, that you knew what it meant as well as I did."

"But I hoped—always—that we should soon be married; and now—now this other delay," she said plaintively.

"So we should have been, dearest, had I been free. I would gladly have done anything you wished, gone through any tomfoolery you demanded, if it would have added an iota to your happiness." He seated himself on the arm of her chair and drew her towards him. "Surely, darling, you know that, don't you? It's not my fault that I'm bound to this wretched lunatic."

His voice had assumed the beguiling tone she could not resist. He threw into it all the persuasion of which he was capable as he felt her quiver in the shelter of his encircling arm, press her face to his sleeve, then clasp his hand with both hers and lay it against her lips. She was pained at his silence, his secrecy, that was all, and she said at last, "You should have told me."

It was a repetition of what she had said before, and he experienced a faint impatience that she, so quick as

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a rule to understand, should hark back to the same topic instead of sweeping forward.

"I meant to tell you long ago. Several times I nearly made a clean breast of it, but I was afraid of losing your friendship in the old days. I know that nothing enrages a woman more than the discovery that the man she loves has excluded her from the main secret of his life. Knowing that, I remained silent. The day in Kensington Gardens when you asked for an explanation of my silence I nearly told you the truth. But then again I fought shy of the risk; I couldn't face losing you. After that it grew more and more impossible to tell you. Can't you understand that it would? It was a story which I should have told you from the first or not at all."

"Then I wish you had told me from the first," she said regretfully, as she leant forward in the chair, her hands clasped slackly on her knees.

"If you had known, should we have had our happy time abroad, drunk our fill of a love which is surely worth any price we have to pay for it? You don't regret it do you?" Fear rang in his voice. It would be intolerable to find she regretted all that had happened.

She shook her head, "No, I don't regret anything." She looked at him for the first time since he had sat near her and he continued.

"I meant to tell you the truth when we were abroad, but we were so happy that I forgot everything else. I had put Milly from my mind. I forgot everything but you, our love, our happiness. That was all I wanted. I had dreamt of such a life for so long that I could hardly realise I had attained it at last. You

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seemed as happy as I was, as contented; I didn't realise how much you resented your position, until the meeting with Mrs. Chester. It never crossed my mind that you could be unprepared for that sort of treatment, I imagined you wouldn't mind it, you would ignore it. You referred to it again on the boat as we came home, and I began to understand how much it meant to you, how much it haunted you. More than ever I shirked the truth if it meant losing you. I was tempted once—horribly tempted—not to tell you but to let the divorce go through, to wait till you had no claim on Philip, till you had nobody but myself to turn to. But it was too cruel. I couldn't do it, Anne, I loved you too much. That has been my motive from the beginning. Love for you has been the guiding principle of all I did, whether for good or evil. I tempted you at Stiffborough because I loved you—I tempted you in London because I loved you—I have told you the truth now because I love you and I couldn't let you remain ignorant whilst there was still time to retract. For there is time," he added thickly. "You know Philip will take you back even now—if—if—you wish to go back to all that you hated in the old days." He had been more true to the better side of his nature when he explained with ruthless self-revelation all he had done, all he had been; when he had sought no excuses, had sheltered himself behind no inadequate reasons. But she missed these distinctions. At first he had spoken with a violent crudeness which offended her susceptibilities, now he used excuses, pleaded for forgiveness; and these things appealed to her.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked after a pause.

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"Yes, of course," she said simply, "Of course I can, but you should have told me, then I should have known that we must wait longer—till you were free from—her."

He gazed at her blankly. Was it possible that she still failed to realise the true state of affairs? Fear gripped him lest the hardest portion of his task should lie before instead of behind him.

"Wait? What do you mean?" he asked anxiously.

"Wait till you get your marriage cancelled." She felt his arm tremble and then he rose and crossing to the window stared at the park. After a long silence, he returned to the fireplace and said slowly:

"I can't get rid of Milly. She's my wife, and mad or sane must remain so, thanks to the laws of this country.

She faced him with parted lips and wild eyes. "I don't understand why," she faltered at last. "Why?" her voice rose sharply.

"There's no why," he burst out fiercely. "There's nothing but a damned, pharisaical, unreasoning law which binds me and makes you free, free and an outcast. The law stands between us; the law decrees that for its pleasure we must remain as we are. The law—the damned, hellish law which we can break but not alter."

A cry broke from her, and she hid her face in her hands. She understood this time. He had left nothing doubtful, nothing vague, and he waited for the moment when she would raise her head and let him hear her decision—the decision which must seal their fate.

The stillness was intolerable. He broke it by saying hoarsely, "Can't you forgive me?"

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Her face remained hidden, at last she lifted it, and stared dumbly at him.

"Darling, tell me that you understand," he cried.

"Yes, I understand," she said slowly. "I quite understand now." She hesitated. "But I want to think. Will you go—go away—right away and leave me?"

He stooped and kissed her. "I will do anything you wish, darling."

She neither shrank from him nor did she return his embrace; her eyes were fixed on the floor, not on him, as he passed out of the room, and she did not change her attitude until the outer door of the flat closed. Then with a strangled cry of fury, she sprang to her feet. As she did so, the solicitor's letter fluttered to the ground. She gave a little gasp and stood staring at it.

"The damned, pharisaical, unreasoning law which in this case binds me and makes you free—and an outcast!" The words returned to her as her eyes fixed themselves on the clerkly-written document at her feet. "An outcast," Sutherland had said. That was what the letter implied in less bald terms, as it informed her that the period of her husband's clemency had expired. In a short time she would not be his wife. Never, in all probability could she be Martin's. Never! How long it seemed! Slowly she realised the downfall of her hopes, the shattering of her dreams, the hideousness of the truth and all it entailed.

An outcast! That was to be her fate if she remained with Martin; even though she lived in the warm shelter of his love! An outcast, a social leper! Without the right to his name or Philip's. Nameless! Branded!

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She stared at the paper on the floor; at her own name written in the corner. “Lady Inescourt.” It was so long since she had used it that she had almost forgotten her right to it.

“Lady Inescourt,” she repeated aloud; then stooped and picked up the paper, drawing her breath sharply. As she passed into her bedroom, the letter crushed in her hand, she repeated again, “Lady Inescourt—Lady Inescourt.”

CHAPTER XX

ANNE KNOWS HERSELF

THE evening was stormy when the evening train lumbered into the small terminus of Willingsford.

There was seldom a crowd on the platform, except in summer when the marshes attracted artists to the neighbourhood or during fair time, when folk came in from the villages scattered at wide distances over the countryside; consequently the sight of Fred Heathcote, stepping from a first-class compartment, cheered the porter who was dolefully bleating forth the name of the station. Here, at all events, was the certainty of a tip; the only one presumably; since no other figure but the postmistress, returning from a day's shopping in Yorbury, had quitted the empty train.

"The Marston carriage ain't there," the porter volunteered, as he deposited his lamp on the platform, and took possession of Fred's Gladstone bag. But, he added, "Joynson's fly's outside and mayhap he would be pleased of a job." Fred shivered and drew his coat closer round his ears, for the wind struck sharply through the empty station, bringing with it snow-flakes, whirled through the open door from the yard beyond.

There had evidently been a delay in the delivery of the telegram announcing his advent, and the young man was not pleased at the prospect of the six mile drive in the crazy old shandrydan that served all the purposes of note in the village. But even this time-honoured vehicle

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was apparently unavailable, since the driver announced that he was ordered to meet "a party" from London due by this train. Fred swore as he stamped his feet to keep them warm, whilst flyman and porter discussed the various inhabitants likely to give him a lift. Their number was limited; for the weather was ominous, and as the cutting north-east wind which had blown all day sank to comparative rest, the snow-flakes gave promise of a heavy fall. Horse owners would naturally prove loth to trust their animals or carriages over the desolate road at this hour of the evening; moreover the six miles lying between Willingsford and Marston possessed an ill-reputed corner, which few country folk ventured to negotiate after dark, lest they should encounter a blind fiddler who was wont to vanish through the impenetrable quick-set hedge that fenced the roadway. Fred's temper was not improving with the cold and delay.

"I can't walk in this kit," he remarked crossly, indicating his London garments, which he had not found time to change. "I'm cold and hungry, and I want to get home as quickly as I can."

There was a pause in the discussion between the porter and the flyman, ending in the brilliant idea that as "the party" expected for the fly had not come, Fred had better take it and get home. This course had been practically decided on, when lights gleamed in the station yard and the Marston phæton appeared. The groom was full of apologies; but the telegram had arrived late, the night was so bad that he had not dared to hurry the horse for fear of an accident. Miss Heathcote, he added, was sorry to send the open trap, but the brougham was in use by the squire. Fred lent an in-

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different ear to the talk whilst his bag was being stowed in the back of the phæton. Provided he got home, nothing else mattered; and buttoning himself into the fur-lined coat that Miriam had sent for him, he clambered up beside the groom, and left the porter with sheepish stolidity to watch his departure and finger his easily earned sixpence.

The railway official's stolid content was disturbed by a step behind him. The sound had a startling effect, convinced as he was of being alone; yet here was a woman, muffled to her eyes, in dark furs and with a thick veil, on which the snow-flakes found a temporary resting place. Was she wanting anything? Had she any luggage? he asked, scenting another sixpence. The first question she ignored; to the second she replied that there were a couple of boxes in the van which she would send for to-morrow, unless she decided to return to London; in which case she would fetch them herself. Advancing to the fly, she requested, in the same muffled tones, to be driven to Stiffborough village, and a moment later the porter watched the second conveyance disappear, as the old horse staggered dolefully forward, its head bent against the wind and snow that drifted in its patient face.

Away through the night went the cab, Anne motionless in a corner, till they turned to the left, and she peered out of the window, eager to catch a glimpse of the moonlit sea whose booming was audible in the distance.

She was filled with a wild craving for the expanse of marshland that was visible, from the road down which they were travelling. She had hungered for it

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on her journey, had anticipated it with an eagerness she failed to understand. But now snow clouds obscured the scene, veiled the moon, and she could discern nothing across the blinding scuds of sleet of which particles drifted through the crevices of the fly windows as it progressed slowly in the teeth of the gale.

Feverishly anxious to reach the end of her journey her slow progress exasperated her, although her longing to arrive was tempered with alarm at the prospect of confronting Philip. Her hands beat a restless tattoo on her muff; the dyed fur mat under her feet was a poor defence against the icy draught that numbed her, and her face was stiff from the wind that swept round her as she cowered in a corner of the station till Fred Heathcote departed.

Safe inside the cab, she put back her veil and turned down the collar of her coat. In the fitful light of the lamps her face showed thin and strained; an unnatural brightness shone in her eyes; a vivid flush came and went on the pallor of her skin, as she pressed her face to the window, and strove once again to pierce the darkness and localise her position. She had no difficulty this time, and drew back with a shudder, as she recognised a spot filled with associations of Martin.

How well she remembered leaving the pony-cart here one summer's day whilst they wandered seawards to a remote corner of the marsh. It had been a gorgeous afternoon early in June; her happiness had been complete, and she had no suspicion whither they were drifting, did not even suspect that they were drifting in those days, she was only conscious of

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the delight of being with Martin. The last sea-pinks and the first pale mauve statice had painted the bosom of the marsh, and she had gathered handfuls only to cast them aside, till he had accused her of picking the flowers from a wanton love of destruction, or from the momentary desire of possession that dominated every woman.

She repudiated the accusation, calling him a sentimentalist, like Miriam, who would never burn flowers because they were "sentient things." It was nonsense, she vowed. Sutherland replied that women were heartless beings who treated creatures weaker than themselves with needless cruelty. Her sex revenged itself for men's superiority in strength by venting its feeble power on the helpless beings of creation. Again she had denied his assertion, and he had added insult to injury, as she said, by announcing that every woman's aim was to subjugate a man in order to treat him in the manner in which she had treated the sea-pinks and lavender left to wither in the sun. The scene rose before her, the conversation, gaily flung from one to the other with that light mockery, based on a serious foundation which was typical of the Affinities' methods, and for a moment, inside the ricketty fly, the June sun shone in an azure sky, the marsh glowing with rose and amethyst, surrounded herself and the man she loved. Life had been pleasant then, their playing with fire delectable beyond expression.

She was rudely awakened by the jolt, jolt, jolt, with which the fly floundered on a piece of newly stoned roadway. The shock to her weary body roused her

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from retrospective meanderings down the paths of a dead past, and her thoughts reverted to the present. Was it only this morning that Martin had told her the truth concerning himself and Milly? Was it only this morning she had realised the impossibility of the marriage to which, throughout all these months, she had pinned her faith? Surely it had happened long ago? Years, not hours must have elapsed? She had passed through such anguish of mind, through such lassitude of body, after fighting her great fight. Did she love him any less for his confession? No. Did she love Philip any more? No. She had no desire to return, nor did she long to resume the life she abhorred; she only lacked the courage to face any other. Merely in order that her husband's house and name might shelter her against the storm of the world's opinion, she forsook the man she loved and turned to the man she did not love. Truly she was despicable!

For the first time in her life she beheld herself in her true aspect. Forced to cast aside the graceful draperies with which, even to herself, she had always clothed her inmost soul, she knew herself a coward. Faithless to her husband in the past, faithless to her lover in the present; from each she had demanded the best, to each she had given mediocrity and ingratitude. Vain and selfish though she was, she shrank with abject fear from this terrible revelation.

At the commencement of her journey she had thought pityingly of herself as a wronged, sorrow-stricken woman claiming her right to seek assistance from her husband; she had fortified herself with the memory of his promise made on that winter's night

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at Stiffborough. "I shall always love you, always wait for you . . . I should try and make you forget all that you have gone through." In her misery, those words were as soothing as ointment laid on a wound. They had been the final cause of her decision when she had caught sight of her name written in the prim, clerkly hand. The name and its appurtenances of legality had represented that for which she lived; it had roused within her the necessity to stand well in the eyes of the world.

As she jolted through the night over uneven roads, she saw her position, saw herself, too, in a new aspect. Face to face with her naked soul, she stared at it, beholding it as some malformed abortion which common decency demanded that no living being should see; and yet, hide it though she might from her neighbours, to herself it must always stand forth in all its horrible deformity. For ever she must live in the knowledge that this unspeakable thing was herself—her very soul.

Never more could she behold herself through the rose-coloured glasses of bygone days; never more could she hold up her head in the eyes of the world, or in her own sight. She, who had mocked at Edith Stewart; what was she now? In what was she better than the woman whom she had treated with contemptuous scorn? Better? She was a thousand times worse. The memory of Miriam's words flashed through her brain.

"I shall always respect her; for she had the courage of convictions. . . . Not one woman in a thousand would have faced it!" And Anne knew that though she too, had sinned, even as Edith had

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sinned, she could lay no claim on heroism. She belonged to the nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine who would fain taste the results of sin, yet shrank from the payment thereof. She had shown the white feather, proclaimed herself a coward. She groaned aloud, and overwhelmed by an agony of shame shrank down in her seat, her hands crushed together in an agony of self-abasement.

She had crossed and ruined two lives besides her own! The thought wrung from her a cry of horror. She clutched the edge of the seat as she had once clutched the edge of the oak settle in Stiffborough Hall. Then she had been alarmed at the revelation of another's character; now it was the truth concerning her own which possessed and terrified her a thousandfold more. Rigid, cold, she stared before her at the bow-fronted window of the fly. In its concave surface she beheld her own image, distorted, caricatured, twisted. A moment ago she had seen her soul in its hideousness, now it was her body, that body so dear to her, so valued for its loveliness. Was there nothing left? Nothing to console her? Hushed within her now was her old cry of individualism and its rights with which she had sought to palliate her sin in her letter to Philip. Dead was her belief in the affinity of mutual souls; her weak echo of Sutherland's theory that in bowing to the power of an illicit passion she was fulfilling the laws of nature. Dead, vanished, mute were all the theories, the fallacies, and creeds, which she had clung to, in which she had possessed, or had feigned to possess, a belief. She was no heroine, no heart-stricken, repentant Magdalene seeking absolution; she was a beggar depending on the charity and

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magnanimity of a sorely outraged man. To no all-pardoning, all comprehending Divinity was she turning in her hour of need, but to a man moulded of the same elements as herself—a man who would judge her from the standpoint of earthly justice, not from the compassionate standpoint of Divine charity. After all, why should Philip forgive? Why should he take her back? she who could not even say: “I come because I love you—because I hate myself and my sin.” She hated neither. She sought to avoid unpleasant consequences. That was the crude, mean truth.

How dared she, then, approach this man whom she had wronged? How dared she seek him and cry, “I have sinned against Heaven and before thee,” and pray him of his mercy to forgive? Would he bid her welcome? Would he place the ring of love on her hand, the shoes of forgiveness on her feet? Long-suffering, tender, and merciful though she knew him to be, it needed something far above these attributes to enable him to receive the woman who had dishonoured his name and broken his life. She quailed at the thought.

Supposing he bade her go? Told her harshly that this was no longer her home, he would be in his right; for the six months had expired a month ago, and he had signified his desire for freedom.

Tired in body, exhausted by torturing thoughts, she saw clearly enough that, hitherto, her point of view had been wholly her own, that she had been concerned only with her own future, her own plans, her own decisions. Herself and Martin—these had been the central figures around which the drama revolved.

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Philip had been a vaguely existing refuge at the eleventh hour! Now he stood forth to her terrified gaze; clear and tangible; her judge, her accuser, perhaps her executioner. She was filled with dread, and, her mind once directed towards her husband, she fell to thinking of him, to recalling his tenderness, his patience, his goodness to her. She wondered where he was, what he was doing, whilst she drove towards him through the storm. Was he in the library, surrounded by his dogs, reading some sporting paper, or engrossed in the study of a farm manual? What mood was he in? Was he happy? Content? Was he longing for her, or rejoicing at her absence? Was he waiting for her as he had promised, or counting the hours till he could feel himself released? Which was it? She tormented herself with questions to which there were no answers, maddened herself with problems to which she had no solutions, till physical weariness overcame her, and as she leant back in the fly the lashes drooped over her eyes and she slumbered uneasily.

CHAPTER XXI

FULFILLING HIS PROMISE

THE man who occupied so prominent a place in Anne Inescourt's thoughts was not at Stiffborough, nor was he desiring to return. She had become as subsidiary a figure in his mind as he had hitherto been in hers, and to-day especially he had been occupied with other matters. The morning had been passed in thinning trees that overcrowded a covert lying midway between Stiffborough and Marston ; then he went to lunch with Miriam, who after a fortnight's absence had returned home, and during her absence he had realised more fully how much she represented to him, how intolerable it would be were anything to drift them apart. He had intentionally crowded into his lonely days a host of occupations, since leisure afforded too much time in which to miss her, too many opportunities for brooding over the unpleasant period that lay before him, when his name must be dragged through the divorce court, though the suffering those proceedings must entail would be the precursor to a happiness that dawned on the horizon of his life. To-day, strive as he might to turn his thoughts away from this possible future, they overpowered his will, until at last he yielded to them and let the prospect of his future fill him with content as he made his way across the fields to Marston.

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Snow had been falling intermittently all the morning, and he knew that when the north-east wind dropped it would descend in earnest; but nothing could stop his visit, and he walked quickly, the spaniel "Jess" trotting at his heels. By the time he reached his destination, massing clouds hid the distance, and the flakes had increased both in size and quantity till they crunched with a crisp sound, as of crumpled silk, beneath his feet.

Inside the house the familiar air of comfort reigned; the scents of pot-pourri, or dried lavender, were as balm to his soul, and the sight of Miriam was doubly welcome after her absence. They greeted one another with the silence of perfect understanding, but he looked at her closely, fearful lest any change should have occurred, although in his heart he knew such things were impossible; but he was in a mood of tense anxiety. Once assured that all was well, he rallied her on her desertion of Marston, and told her that "Bustard" had forgotten his way to her home, but though she laughed with him, he was conscious that a faint element of sadness had imparted itself to her voice, and lent a wistfulness to her eyes. He wondered at the cause, but being a man who respected the reticences even of his familiar friends, he kept silence, and it was not until luncheon was finished that he fathomed the mystery. She had told him of her doings in London, of the plays she had seen, the people she had met, all the little things likely to interest or amuse him. Then he asked if she had seen her brother, and how he fared.

The mention of Fred's name deepened the little

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sadness in her face, though she answered cheerfully:

"Quite fit and well. Flourishing in all ways. He comes here to-night." She paused, then added rather sharply: "He's engaged to be married."

"Top-hole! What's she like? Will she be an addition to the neighbourhood? Will she hunt? Do you like her?"

She laughed. "What a string of questions! Well, to begin with, she's pretty and nice; and I think she will be a great addition to the neighbourhood. As for liking her, I hope I shall." She hesitated. "I only heard the news a couple of days ago, and haven't yet attuned myself to the new conditions which it entails. Fred and I have been so much to one another all our lives, that the break will be a big one; however, if it's for his happiness I'm content, though one has one's selfish side, and I know I shall miss him most horribly."

"Not if she's a good sort. Surely it needn't make any real difference, need it?"

"A real difference is a wide term. When a man marries, he deserts the old paths." She thought regretfully of Philip's marriage, his straying from the old paths, and her tone was doubly sad.

"On the principle of:

'Your son's your son till he gets him a wife,
Your daughter's your daughter all your life,' "

he asked?

She nodded.

"It had to come sooner or later, but it's come sooner than I expected, that's all. However, Fred's

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thirty, and I daresay it's time he settled down." She longed to see the best in this matter, but it was hard.

"Every man's the better for being married—provided it's to the right woman," Philip said slowly.

Miriam detected the regret in his voice; but it lifted again as he added: "Some of us make a hash of things at first—but—perhaps it all comes right in the end?" His words had taken the form of a question, almost an appeal.

"Compensation in all things, my dear. Everybody has their bad and their good time; either a happy early life is followed by a bad later on, or vice-versa. It's a wonderful law, that law of compensation."

He nodded, not having troubled his head about such questions, but convinced of her knowledge; for he considered her "awfully clever," although in a different way from Anne.

"I hope it does," he said, after an interval of such duration that, had they not been in complete unison, she might have been at a loss.

"Mim, do you know what an awful lot depends on the next few months?" he asked suddenly. "They're going to be horrible to get through decently, but perhaps there will be compensation even for them—will there?" He turned towards her as he spoke, and his face wore an eagerness she could not mistake. "There's nothing to be said now, but—oh—Mim, I say, you do understand, don't you? I'm an awful fool, and I do hunger most horribly for some of that compensation you think everybody gets. It's the devil of a time coming, isn't it?"

She laughed a little unsteadily, longing to hear

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more, yet knowing that for the present nothing further must be said. Both would repent, perhaps, in days to come, that they had not maintained their dignified attitude till the very last, since both were proud, with a high sense of honour. In after years, when she looked back, as she often did, to that eventful evening, she was inexpressibly thankful for those few words of his, inexpressibly thankful, too, that she had turned him from further speech, though she often longed wearily for the words that, she knew, were on his lips.

"All comes to him who knows how to wait. But he must wait in silence," she said very softly.

"You're right, Mim, as you always are."

They had reached high water mark in their conversation, and it flagged after that, their subsequent attempts to talk on different topics failed until Miriam, painfully conscious of the strain on them both, suggested his departure, for the snow had increased, and he ought, she said, to return before the roads grew impassable.

The night proved singularly uninviting when he emerged from the house, for the wind blew off the sea, the moon was obscured by drifting clouds, as with his coat collar turned up round his ears, his hands thrust into his pockets, Inescourt walked quickly down the avenue. No weather, however, had power to dim the gladness within him. He was fired by the memory of his own words, by Miriam's gentle check on a speech that he at present had no right to make, but which was often on his lips when they were together. His mind flew to the future, to the prospect that stretched before him, when the ordeal of the next few months

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should be over. What happiness and peace he would attain with that dear woman to save him from the blunders into which he so often fell. He was apt to over-estimate his stupidity, mindful as he still was of Anne's persistent accentuation of it by some covert sneer or open rebuke that caused the sense of his limitations to haunt him. But Miriam was so different; so tolerant, so understanding, so anxious to make allowance for his failures and shortcomings, so swift to help when he found himself immersed in a conversational quagmire, that he was rapidly gaining confidence in himself.

The fierceness of passion within him had burnt itself out during his marriage, and now he longed for a helpmate, a comrade to whom he could turn, in whom he would find the patient sympathy which he needed. His love for Miriam was pure and clear; finely tempered as the dawn of a September day, when the first hint of autumn breathes in the freshness of the air, though the glory of summer still reigns upon earth. His feelings for her were purged from all defilement, all grossness of animal passion; it was the love she would have chosen, the only love possible for a woman so passionless by nature, so puritanical by instinct and training. Each supplied what the other needed, and Philip had slowly realised this until his longing for the friend of his childhood had become the dominating force of his existence.

From comparing the two women in his mind, he pictured Stiffborough as it would be in the future, the setting of a life of peace; of the communion of thought and interest, that a marriage with Miriam would ensure.

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Giving rein to his imagination, as he had never done before; he allowed it to run riot and create for him all manner of pleasant views as he strode through the rapidly deepening snow oblivious of the storm that raged round him.

“Jess,” with no such dreams to buoy her up or assist her short legs in carrying her plump little person through the heavy going, travelled painfully in his wake. Her long ears trailed on the snow, her head was bent against the gusts of the storm, and at last, as he out-distanced her, she sat down, emitting a doleful wail that disturbed her master’s meditations. He stopped and, turning, beheld the small inky spot amid the surrounding whiteness. The sound of her woe, brought him abruptly to earth with the realisation that in the contemplation of his own prospective happiness he had unwittingly been cruel to the dog behind him. He went back to her quickly, and she fawned on him with plaintive whimpers of reproach, licked his boots, gazed up at him with her appealing spaniel eyes. Gently he commiserated with her.

“Poor little woman; I ought to have left you at Marston,” he said regretfully. As he stooped down to pat her he found the silky paws clogged with balling snow. “What a brute I’ve been, walking along so quickly and forgetting you.”

He was full of indignation for his momentary forgetfulness of the creature who crouched before him, and picking her up, tucked her under his arm and resumed the journey. But the walk was a different matter now that his thoughts no longer soared in altitudes of bliss, and he was weighted with the wet, cumbrous

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black body that pressed itself against him. He regretted his decision to take the short cut through the fields, indistinguishable as the whirling snow obscured familiar landmarks, and the hedges became masked by drifts through which he dared not pass, lest he should fall into the ditches that yawned below the fences. Knowing, however, that, two fields further on, he could strike the main road, he struggled forward, feeling his way cautiously step by step. But the snow was already knee-deep in many places, and it was difficult to locate the gateways, even during a lull when the wind allowed the flakes to fall in silence, and on more than one occasion he found himself hopelessly at fault.

“Jess” shivered and whined as the fierce gusts caught them, and when they reached the less sheltered portions of the land, Philip was often forced to pause and turn his back to the gale. The dog was no light weight, as he shifted her from one arm to the other, and those two fields seemed interminable. When he reached the road matters scarcely improved; he dared not put “Jess” down, so deep was the snow, so cruelly did the wind buffet them; and the three miles that still lay between himself and Stiffborough assumed a formidable aspect as he stood in a sheltered corner to rest. Waiting in the angle of the hedge, he caught the muffled sound of an approaching carriage, and, straining his eyes through the mist, he saw the lights of a conveyance that approached slowly from Willingsford. The lamps glowed through the night with yellow-toned cheerfulness as the stumbling horse and the slow rumble of the clogged wheels drew nearer. He was unfeignedly glad, for he meant to beg the occupants—

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whoever they might be—to take the dog with them, and leave him free to walk more rapidly. As the carriage reached him, he recognised the familiar outlines of Joynson's fly, and hailing the driver, asked whither he was bound. "Stiffborough," he answered. Then in reply to a question from Sir Philip, added that a lady was inside who, "maybe wouldn't mind the dog's riding along of her."

Anne started from her uneasy slumbers, heard vaguely the sound of voices, but without recognising either tones or words; and as Joynson opened the door of the fly, she hastily drew her collar round her face, lest he should recognise her. She agreed with his request to permit a gentleman's dog to come with her, for any living thing was welcome to distract her from this mental Calvary on which her soul was being crucified, but as the driver stepped aside and Philip's figure loomed bulkily in the open doorway, a cry escaped her.

Absorbed as he was in bestowing "Jess" in the bottom of the carriage, he failed to hear it, but he looked up a moment later, took off his cap with a smile, and a few words of gratitude to the figure shrouded in furs who occupied the furthest corner of the fly.

"It's awfully good of you to take her; she'll behave all right for she's dead beat, poor little brute, after struggling through the snow. She's a bit big to carry," he added.

The familiar tones of his voice, the kindness of his face, reddened by the weather, his eyes, keenly blue in the fitful glare of the carriage lamps, arrested her attention, and her heart beat wildly, as she stared at

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him and clutched the fur collar tightly round her face.

Should she betray herself and hasten their meeting? With her keen eye for dramatic effect, she shrank from choosing this musty fly as a setting for the encounter she had mentally staged amid the age-mellowed dignity of Stiffborough. Even in this moment of tense excitement, when her whole future hung in the balance, her instinct for dramatic effect overpowered her anxiety. It was unsuitable that this stirring scene should be enacted in a dilapidated shandrydan drawn by a weary brown horse! She could not reconcile herself to the idea; then, knowing that by the revelation of her identity she would be spared a further half-hour of torturing anxiety and racking surmises, she made her choice, and when Philip looked up again, he was confronted by his wife's face as she dropped the disquising collar.

"Won't you come in, too, Phil?" she asked in a frightened voice, yet using the old abbreviation of his name.

He started back; the colour flew from his face, leaving it sterner than she had ever seen it. "Anne," he said hoarsely, as he gripped the handle of the door and stared at her.

There was no gladness, no welcome in his face; nothing but horror, so that fear possessed her lest he had no intention of fulfilling the promise on which she pinned her faith.

"I've come back—" she said weakly; "because you said once that you would wait for—me—that you would—love me—always."

He was silent, gazing at her sternly, and she saw

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bewilderment, amazed fear spread itself over his countenance as the significance of his wife's presence flashed through his brain with blinding lucidity.

Anne had come! What of Miriam? What of his dreams?

His impulse was to shut the door of the carriage, to escape from the pale face, the frightened eyes, ringed with purple shadows, the lips, blue with cold. He longed to shut it all out of his sight, to blot it from his memory, to forget that he had been confronted by this ghost of the past. But that was the coward's refuge, if refuge indeed it could be called, and he thrust it from him. Still he hesitated; then, as Joynson clambered on the box, Inescourt entered the fly and closed the door with a bang.

As they moved on, Anne spoke tremulously, using the same plea.

"I've come back because you promised to wait for me—to love me always. I've come to throw myself on your mercy—Phil—because I've nobody but you—nobody—"

She spoke with comparative calm; then strength and self-control forsook her, and in an abandonment of tears, she poured forth her story. Long afterwards, when she sought to recall all that occurred she had but a vague recollection of it. She remembered weeping unrestrainedly, imploring his forgiveness, promising to atone by all the means in her power for her cruelty, her faithlessness; if he would only take her home, only forgive her, only help her to forget all that had happened. But from him there had been no word, no sign, nothing but an overwhelming, and terrible silence.

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The woman's tragedy sought and found relief in words ; and as she spoke incoherently, wildly, her burden lifted itself, and descended on the man by her side, who, silent, motionless, was conscious of its suffocating pressure. Already, had she but known it, the drama had shifted from her to him, and he sat crushed beneath the burden of it as his dream of happiness vanished.

He had no word to say. Inarticulate at any time, this cataclysm stunned him, and he sat, his clenched fists pressed on his knees, his eyes fixed on the blurred outlines of the hedgerows that defiled past the fogged windows. He neither turned his head towards her nor looked at her, and when, at last, in a paroxysm of entreaty she seized the hand nearest her and pressed it with an agonised grip, he freed himself thrusting his hand into his pocket and withdrawing as far from her as the limits of the carriage would permit.

The silent rebuke, with its evident repulsion, inspired her with terror. He heard her muffled cry, as rigidly erect and mute, he saw, without looking, her shamed agony, her helpless dependence on himself. Through it all he heard no trace of love, found no sign that she cared for aught save the rehabilitation of her tarnished reputation, the shelter of the home she had callously deserted. There was only fear and supplication in her self-abasement ; the constant iteration of a promise that was to shatter all his hopes for the future.

She had come to him trusting in his promise to wait for her—to love her. How could he abjure that promise rashly given, blindly accepted, ruthlessly exacted from him ? He realised the grim irony of the situation as he heard above the jolting of the musty fly his wife's

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piteous entreaties for pardon, but it was not until the lights of Stiffborough village twinkled into sight, like bright eyes piercing the misty whiteness of the night, that he woke from that stillness in which he had faced his ruined hopes and had seen whither duty and his unbounded sense of honour beckoned him.

In a few moments they would be at the door of his home and he must speak to her, make his decision. His final decision! But was it not made for him without any volition of his own? Had not the woman by his side decreed it? Had not his own words spoken long ago made it for him? He shrank from the prospect.

No, it was impossible. Why was he to sacrifice everything for a faithless woman, a heartless coward? Was Miriam to be sacrificed to this—adulteress? It was horrible; he could not endure to place the two women in conjunction, even in thought. The first steps in his divorce had been taken. It should go through. He had suffered enough at Anne's hands. Miriam's happiness as well as his own depended on his actions in the next few moments.

He turned towards his wife. No, he would not sacrifice himself, or the woman he loved, for this creature from whom he revolted in body and soul. As his eyes met Anne's, she saw they were blue as the North Sea on a summer's day—cold, clear, hard.

"You promised," she said in a choked voice, "and I—have come."

He caught his breath. Yes, he had promised. So he thrust aside temptation, ashamed that he should have listened to it even for an instant as his promise

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stared him in the face. Then he spoke, slowly, painfully, like a child repeating a lesson learnt by rote:

“Yes—I promised to wait for you—” He paused, then with a desperate effort, “You are welcome home,” he said, as a gust of wind, sweeping across the marshland, shrieked its mocking welcome to Anne’s return.

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